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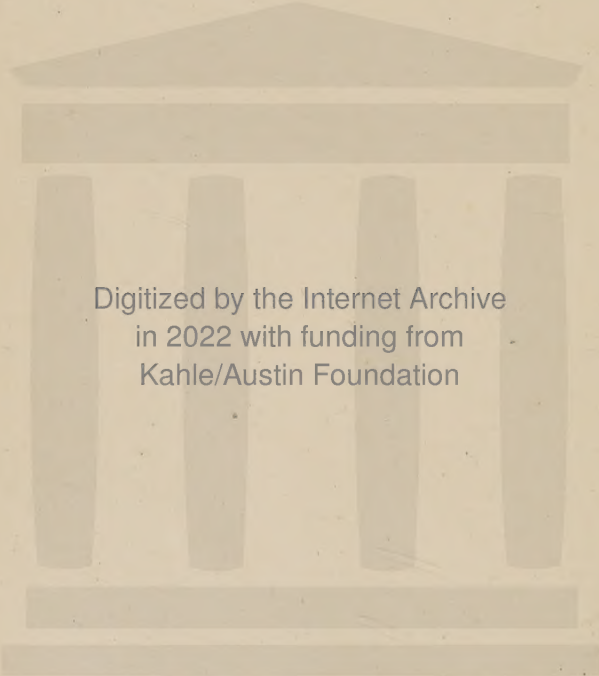
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GERALD KERSH

THEY DIE WITH THEIR BOOTS CLEAN
THE NINE LIVES OF BILL NELSON
THE DEAD LOOK ON
BRAIN AND TEN FINGERS

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FACES IN A DUSTY PICTURE

BY

GERALD KERSH

So when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption,
and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall
be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is
swallowed up in victory.

I. Corinthians, 15

THE WORLD'S WORK (1913) LTD
KINGSWOOD :: SURREY

Dedicated to
CARL OLSSON,
my good and loyal friend

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FACES IN A DUSTY PICTURE

ONE

MR. MANN stands outside the Hotel Bristol, gently ruminant, a man of books, mature yet virginal, heavy with the fruits of other mens' experience; mildly astonished like an artificially-inseminated cow. He looks up and down the large, long street, observing the hard white light and hard black shadows. This, he feels, might be a gracious and pleasant place, if it were not simmering like a pot with unrest. The people who are walking seem, to Mr. Mann, to be in a little too much of a hurry, while those who are standing still are not sufficiently relaxed. It is as if somebody has told them to stand at ease: they might be waiting for a warning roar and an ear-splitting bark, at which they must leap to attention and get ready to move to the right or to the left . . . or God help them.

A fat man, a prosperous Arab, raises his head, half-cringing, to look at the sky as an aeroplane flies over; his fez slips. A man who is following him at the shafts of a hand-cart hastily loaded with valuables also looks up. From the back of the cart a piece of tapestry trails in the dust. Mr. Mann smiles a little, looks at his wrist-watch, gazes left and right again. More aeroplanes pass. The street is too full of people. There are women with bundles: stained with the sweat and dust of strenuous journeys they blink helplessly at the upper windows on both sides of the street. Where are they to go? Mr. Mann shakes his head. A Copt, fat and solemn, leads past a melancholy procession of women and children, all crying and talking and carrying bundles. The smallest child struggles under a cooking-pot: he has put it over his head so that he walks in the dark, holding on to the garment of the little boy in front of him.

From a different direction walk three women, accompanied by a man of indeterminate nationality with a smashed nose. Mr. Mann observes what he might at another time have described as "a microcosmic interstellar collision". There is a clash and a swirl, and the man with the smashed nose pushes the Copt, and the Copt complains in a shrill voice, and all the women lift up their voices in a noise which Mr. Mann can liken only to the chirping of sparrows in protest against an invading cockatoo. The Copt woman is the cockatoo. It is becoming interesting when a policeman, with a calm and authoritative look—with nothing but a look—silences them. He jerks a thumb. They disperse. But the little boy with the pot over his head wanders into the road and the car pulls up with a scream of brakes while a voice from the driver's seat screams abuse. Mr. Mann feels that he ought to do something about this, but before he can bring himself to the pitch of action a thin soldier with the kind of face one associates with a quick quarrel and a hasty blow, reaches out a hand as brown and dry as a bundle of cinnamon sticks, hooks the boy with one forefinger, drags him back, smacks his bottom, and sends him on his way.

Mr. Mann pretends not to see. The soldier shouts into the thick of a crowd:—"Maddy! Madison!"

Another soldier comes into Mr. Mann's field of vision, sweating profusely—a low-built, stocky, dark man with an ox-like set to his head and a bullock's lumbering shoulders. Mr. Mann, who has involved himself in the proper study of mankind, says to himself: "This fellow could be a handful, for all the slow look of him. . . . Unwise to be taken in by the superficial good-nature of his expression. . . . And how lightly he moves, in spite of all that weight! If he lived on my land I'd certainly know where to look for a rabbit-wire. . . ."

The stocky soldier called Madison wipes sweat off his nose with a forefinger and says. "What *is* all this shower, Bennett?"

Bennett, the cinnamon-handed skinny soldier, says: "Come on, come *on!* You ——"

Then he sees Mr. Mann, who is wearing the two pips of a full lieutenant. "Officer!" he whispers; but his whisper hisses like escaping steam. The two soldiers become tense, salute, walking on; but Mr. Mann, returning the salute, hears Bennett say: "And that's pushed Rommel back another ten miles!"

And he hears Madison grunting: "Why worry? They want it, so let 'em have it."

Mr. Mann, of the Royal Archers, still smiles and waits. He is a gentleman who looks upon mankind as a caste in a super-spectacle, and sees each day as an instalment in a vivid and enthralling serial-story—a fragment of an immense Work In Progress. It gives him a certain harmless pleasure to remember that he knows more about Bennett than Bennett dreams he knows. Bennett will never know, thinks Mr. Mann, that he was overheard when he said of the General: "They give them mugs medals just to make a show. Idea is, to make it look like they done something. I knew an officer once that got the Victoria Cross for getting his eye poked out by a tart with a sunshade."

Mr. Mann knows, also, that Bennett calls him and his friend Mr. Pryde "Mild-and-Bitter", when they are together. Mann is well-informed: he is one of those keenly-observant, objectively-interested men whom the whole world seems to pelt with interesting facts and figures—a lucky lotus-eater reclining under the Tree of Knowledge. Everything comes his way: as soon as a thing is ripe it drops into his mouth. People wonder why such a man has drifted into a common regiment of foot-sloggers, a rough-

house mob like the Archers, recruited from the hard, dour men of the Midlands—obstinate men, grim and joyless, hard to train, slow to trust a stranger, glum and suspicious of new faces—sullen, dogged, unfriendly men prised away from the flat grey farms and the blank grey towns of their shires. Mr. Mann might easily have got himself a safe, even an interesting job. He speaks four languages fluently, although he has never troubled to acquire any accuracy of accent: it is more important to Mann that he shall understand rather than be understood. Intelligence, for example, would have jumped at him. So would any of the Ministries. He could have wangled something, with his qualifications: it is whispered that he has a Science Degree and a B.A. There was no need for him to get tied up in the messy, dangerous and uncomfortable side of the war: obviously, he is an eccentric, for here he stands, idly watching the terrified refugees as they hurry out of the line of the German advance.

Mr. Pryde finds Mann fascinating in his clear intelligence, but irritating in his imperturbability. He knows everything, good and bad, and cares about nothing. Pryde feels vaguely aggrieved at Mann's smiling acceptance of life and death. He ought to worry more, discard a little of his philosophy, grumble about something, express a hate. As for the men, they like Mann because he is sensible and courteous, but they have no great faith in him as a soldier—they can't quite see him with a revolver smoking in one muddy fist, waving his unoccupied arm and shouting: "Come on boys, let's give the bastards hell!" He is what they call dead cushy; the great white hope of defaulters. If he punishes a man he does it perfunctorily, with a certain half-amused, half-apologetic half-smile that seems to say: *I don't give a damn whether you are late for parade or not; if it rested with me you could go and play Housie-Housie.*

and good luck to you. Nothing ever seems to matter much to Mr. Mann. His Commanding Officer has something like affection for him, but cannot help thinking that it would do no harm if Mann assumed, for the duration of the war at least, something of a military manner, and tried to look more like a fighting-man and less like the kindly and affable gentleman of independent means that he is. Anyway, what the devil does the man want to come out here at all for, the C.O. wonders; the fellow has a Science Degree . . . Why the hell doesn't he go and make poison gas, or liquid fire, or high explosive, as a good-natured and sweetly-smiling gentleman of education should?

But Mann does not explain himself. More often than not, when somebody is speaking to him directly, he is only half-listening—always half-smiling—and thinking of some irrelevancy. The last time the Colonel spoke to Mann, for example, he almost burst out laughing as he remembered that the men had nicknamed the Colonel "Stinkpot": the Colonel had glared at him from under sulphur-coloured eyebrows and his moustache had thrust itself upwards and outwards . . . a ferocious blond moustache stained by cigarette-smoke to the colour of an old Malacca cane. "And what, exactly, is the joke, Mr. Mann?"—"I beg your pardon, sir, no joke at all. . . ."

The Colonel's nickname is "Stinkpot"; the Medical Officer, Probyn-Tweed, is called "The Plumber", or "The Vet"; the Regimental Sergeant-Major is "The Black Bastard"; Mr. Pryde is "Little Putrid", or most frequently "Pute" for short; General Eagles is called "Tomtit"; Captain Tobin is called "Captain Toe-Rag"; and he, Mann, is known as "The Old Woman", or "Mother Mann". He manages to acquire such crumbs of knowledge, picking them up in his polished way as a boot picks up dust. A strange man, this, standing outside the Hotel Bristol and

peering benevolently at a terrified and chaotic world while he beats a little tattoo with his stick on his calf and waits for Pryde.

Pryde comes. Mann sees him hurrying across the street—a short, dark, compressed-looking man. Glancing at his face, you first notice his eyebrows which are furry and mobile as hairy black caterpillars butting head-to-head over a beaky nose. Although he is young there are lines on his face, especially on his forehead. He is a tense little man with an air of resolution, walking purposefully with a stiff back—not a soldier's back, but a deliberately stiffened back which he holds straight with a conscious effort. A passing soldier out of his Company salutes Pryde who returns the salute with the irritable gesture of a man dashing sweat out of his eyes and snaps off a couple of words that sound like "Good morning", but look like "Damn you". His voice unlike that of Mann, which is gently hesitant, cracks like a whip . . . like a whip that is cracked by a man who is not quite certain of the technique of getting a crack out of a whip and who over-exerts himself in the attempt.

"Aha, Mann!" he says.

"Hallo, Pryde," says Mann. "What do you say to a drink?"

"Here?"

"Here or anywhere you like."

So they go into the hotel, under a chastely-lettered sign which says BRISTOL BAR. As they walk downstairs Mann says: "We might as well have just one very last one." At this Pryde looks at him sharply; he does not like the sound of "very last," but he says nothing. Two exceedingly beautiful ladies pass them. Behind the ladies walks a venerable gentleman with a superb white beard parted in the middle and brushed sideways; a gentleman who seems

to have as many years and honours as one man can possibly carry.

"Prybilov," says Mann, as they go down.

"Who's he?"

"What? Haven't you heard of Prybilov? Ninety years old, worth a hundred million francs at least; made it out of perfume—*Crepuscule de Prybilov* and all that kind of thing—terrible muck, stinks most abominably, only he sold it in the most magnificent bottles of the most bizarre shapes you ever saw in your life. He looks like an ambassador, or something, doesn't he? But the fact of the matter is, that he used to be a chemist of some kind, an apothecary, you know, in Moscow. Odd, don't you think? Amusing . . ."

"How the devil do you find out all these things?"

"It really is very odd," says Mann, tapping a cigarette on a little silver case—a gesture which causes Pryde to blink with annoyance. "Very odd indeed how women—and men too for that matter—like to make themselves smell of something else. Dead violets, squashed roses, the sexual organs of musk-deer, the anus of weasely little Civet-cats . . . ambergris out of the guts of sperm-whales . . . even Skatol, which is a kind of quintessence of human excrement, and gives other perfumes body and piquancy . . . Oh, I *am* so sorry!" Mann treads on somebody's toe, for the lounge is very crowded, but talks on, still tapping his cigarette:—"Now what would we say if, for example, monkeys had the habit of sprinkling themselves with distilled human-beings? People really are very funny, Pryde. Somebody once gave me a shopping basket made out of the shell of an armadillo, and it occurred to me at the time how grotesque it would seem to us if, say, a gorilla carried bananas in the skin of a dead baby. Those two pretty ladies I saw you looking at . . . do you realise what slaughter

goes on to make them beautiful in your eyes and nostrils? Their dresses and underwear come out of the bellies of little white worms fed on mulberry leaves; their shoes are peeled off the corpses of lizards and snakes and calves, and little baby goats are flayed to cover their hands, and what I might describe as the vomit of sick oysters is hung round their necks and called pearls, and the skins of dead rats—Chinchilla rats—decorate their shoulders when the weather is cold, and——”

“Oh, all right, all right, Mann, all right!”

“So sorry: was I annoying you?”

“At a time like this, you start rambling about stuff like that!”

Mann smiles indulgently, and pats Pryde’s shoulder.

“Why, Pryde old fellow! What’s the matter with you now?”

“Nothing at all’s the matter with me . . . I say, Mann, do be a good fellow and either light that damned cigarette or put it away! Tap-tap-tap; fiddle-fiddle-fiddle!”

Mann lights it. “You need a drink,” he says.

“I’m sorry, I beg pardon,” says Pryde, ashamed.

“Ah well,” says Mann, “I was only going to say that it’s improbable that you or I will see as many years or francs to our credit as Prybilov can count.”

“Why drag that up?” Pryde’s hand is unsteady: there are dark marks under his eyes.

Mann is making gestures. With his thin fingers he holds an imaginary tumbler, squirts an imaginary syphon, drops in imaginary ice. Then his smiling lips pucker at an imaginary straw. The barman, grinning, understands perfectly, and makes two gin fizzes, while Pryde drums with his fingers on his knees. The bar is full of officers. Men are shaking hands with an indefinable air of finality: their handshakes

are longer and tighter than usual. The barman is doing well in tips. As Pryde, having gulped his drink, tries to catch his eye, a lanky subaltern throws down a banknote and says:—

"There you are, George: buy yourself a gaudy necktie or something, to remember me by."

"Hope to be seeing you again shortly," says the barman, and adds with unctuous enjoyment: "My Lord."

"What's this, Teddy?" asks Mann. "Lord?"

"Since this morning," says the subaltern. "My name is now Hazlitt: no christian-name, just Hazlitt, fourth Baron, and last of my Line. A Lord, you vulgar beasts; A Peer of the Realm. Shake hands. Feel that——" He holds out a big hand. "No common flesh and blood there, Manny-boy. I wonder whether my blood's gone blue. We'll know soon enough—eh, Pryde?"

"I'm sorry your father——"

"You wouldn't be if you'd known him, Prydey-boy. I'm not. So bear up and have a drink." His wink sends George the barman leaping like a galvanised frog at the bottles on the shelves. A big silvery cocktail-shaker rattles and bounces: the barman juggles with it, throws it from hand to hand, twirls it like a drum-major's baton. Cold white drinks trickle into glasses.

"Hah," sighs Pryde, emptying his glass at a gulp.

"Thirty thousand a year," says Hazlitt. "Thirty thousand pounds. Every year, thirty thousand pounds. And now, all of a sudden, I'm scared to death I'll get killed before I have a chance to lay hands on it. Or crippled, say. You couldn't get much fun out of even that much money if you only had one leg, or if—Christ!—if a stray splinter cut off your——"

"Stop it," says Pryde. "Is *everybody* going morbid today?"

"Ah," says Mann, with mock-solemnity, "the conqueror's prize is dust and lost endeavour, and the beaten man remains a story forever . . ."

He orders another round of drinks; alcohol makes him very happy; he seems to want to dance.

"Dust and lost endeavour my foot," says Hazlitt. "Ah, Captain Probyn-Tweed! Have a drink, sir?"

"One only," says Captain Probyn-Tweed. The presence of this hard-faced medical officer chills Pryde, who sits still and looks at the floor: but Probyn-Tweed eyes him closely and says: "Feeling better, Pryde?"

"Much, thank you," says Pryde, and blushes darkly.

"Didn't know you were ill," says Hazlitt.

"I'm not ill."

"Change of life," says Hazlitt. "Scotch?"

Probyn-Tweed nods absent-mindedly, and reaches out a square, pored, scoured hand for the glass. He is by no means a friendly man. One feels that too much competence has dehumanised him. His hand appears empty, like a cleared table, when it is not holding a scalpel or a thermometer; between his thumb and forefinger the glass of whisky looks like anything but a pleasant drink. He squints at it with stern-distaste: Mann wants to say:—"Testing it for albumen, Doctor?" But he holds his tongue and lets the doctor drink. A cautious sip, a suspicious taste, an inquisitive sniff, a contemplative pause, and then, in a jerk, the whisky is drunk and Probyn-Tweed is sucking the memory of it off his teeth.

"Getting ready, gentlemen?" he asks.

"Yes," says Mann, raising his glass. "And for what we are about to receive, may the Lord give us good reason to be truly thankful."

"Morbid, Mr. Mann?"

"Not in the slightest," says Mann, with a laugh.

"Let's have one more for the ditch," says Pryde, shaking himself.

The doctor shakes his head. "Not for me. I've got to go." He moves away, mutters: "Don't overdo it," and strides out with a brusque grunt of farewell.

"I've never known that crablouse-hunter to buy a drink," says Hazlitt. "You'd think that on an occasion like this he might stretch himself so far as to buy just one round, just one little tiny round. But no. Gentlemen, to the meanest man in the British Army!" Hazlitt is excited, vastly pleased with life. Indeed, everybody in the bar is laughing and talking; there is an atmosphere of hilarity. Even Pryde has begun to sparkle a little, or rather, to throw out a few brief faint sparks of gaiety.

Mann says: "Ah, our friend The Plumber regards a drink as alcohol, to be taken in doses in order to produce a relaxing effect. Not as an aid to social intercourse, not as an avenue of escape, but as a medicine pure and simple. He doesn't see anything at all except in what he believes to be the light of cold reason."

"Well," says Pryde, "I wish I could do that. *I* always see things . . ."

He stops. All the life seems to go out of him. But Mann goes on:—

"A man like The Plumber simply doesn't know the meaning of things like love, or hate, or fear. All men, to him, are parcels of meat and guts. Himself included, oh yes, himself included." Mann picks up an olive, takes from his pocket and opens a small penknife, pensively cuts a neat slit in the olive and removes the stone which he holds up and thoughtfully regards. "Well . . . he will see what plenty of us are made of quite soon now. Literally, what we are made of . . ." He cuts a slice off the olive and says: "Zip! One hair's-breadth stands between life and death,

that is to say success or failure for Probyn-Tweed . . .”

“Yes,” says Pryde, with something like a whimper, “that’s all very well. But it’s easy enough for him to cover up a slip. What about us? Our lives are in his hands. And the General’s, in his hands too; say *he* makes a mistake? That is just unlucky for him; we, of course, we’re unluckier still—we die. But the General, he won’t die. What can happen to a General who makes a mistake?”

Mann says: “Ah, but to make a mistake is, in itself, about the worst thing that can happen to the General.”

Hazlitt has turned away to buy drinks for three or four strangers to whose faces he happens to have taken a fancy. Pryde says: “Let’s go, this place is stifling.”

They walked to the door. Pryde begins to say something, but Mann, lost as usual in his own clouds talks on:—

“No . . . the higher you are on the mountain, the more dangerous it is if you slip. You don’t get as far as our little Tomtit gets—you don’t climb as high from where he started, without tying your heart and soul up in the job. Why, if Tomtit lost a battle through his own fault, do you know what would happen to him? He’d die. His heart would break. He’d have lost his reason for living. Oh, you mark my words——”

“Mann!”

“Uh? Yes?”

“Mann,” says Pryde, “listen. We’ve been friends quite a time. You’re a clever fellow. You’ve read all the books in the world. There’s a personal thing I want to tell you about, something terribly confidential, Mann, terribly important and confidential. You’re a good fellow and I trust you, and I’d like to tell you.”

But they are in the street now. The traffic is congested; the whole town seethes with a hideous unrest. Refugees are coming in and soldiers are going out. Mann says: “Of

course, Pryde. But don't tell me anything private here. I think I know what you want to say."

"You don't; you can't possibly."

"I think I do, old fellow."

Pryde's face changes colour twice in two seconds. It turns from red to white and then from white back to red.

"You can't possibly know—nobody on God's earth knows."

Mann sighs, but the half-smile remains although his voice is sad as he says: "I think I have guessed. Let's wait until we are a little more private."

Nothing more is said. They walk.

TWO

THEY must be the only two men in the town who are not talking. Everyone else who has a voice is using it. It seems that people crave the consolation of talk and of tobacco. Men accost strangers and make excited conversation, as if they had just been released from solitary confinement. Nobody wants to listen—only to talk at the top of his voice. Rumour is running wild, and screaming that the Germans are only ten miles away . . . the Germans are only five miles away . . . the Germans are round the corner . . . the Germans are here, the British forces have capitulated, and the world has come to an end. Only the Military Police keep their mouths shut and walk unhurriedly, swinging their arms. The population teeters on the edge of panic. The cafés overflow. The coffee-skinned dandies who are accustomed to sprawling over five chairs while they drowse over empty cups and full ashtrays sit, huddled, talking fast; or stand, chattering in groups, raising an uproar like that of water-driven primitive machinery. The tyre of a saloon

car bursts with a loud bang, and a hundred people flatten themselves against the walls, grey-faced and trembling. Round the corner an old man carrying a bundle falls down in a faint: somebody runs to him, is seen running, and followed by a dozen more people; they also are seen and followed; two hundred people gather about the man in the road; nobody can see what has happened. The crowd swells. The old man is trodden under foot. Then a couple of policemen crash in; the crowd disperses; somebody runs away, a hundred people run after him. Somebody else, seeing them run, cries out that the Germans are here. Hearts stop beating: the girls in the brothel quarter, having hidden their ornaments, prepare to do business. A French widow, uglier than a gargoyle, tries to poison herself rather than be raped by the invaders. The two soldiers, Bennett and Madison, emerge, still thirsty, from a place where beer is sold, and walk towards the Camp. You can learn something about these men by watching them as they make their way through the crowds. Bennett bobs and weaves, dancing like a boxer: Madison crashes through like a heavy truck.

The crowds thin out. Bennett and Madison are on the road to the Camp. Bennett is still grumbling. "... Stop me a dollar for a winder-pane, mind you! Could I 'elp a accident? You saw. Didn't you see? A crack, nothink more; thin little crack. Bloody Quarter-Bloke—what a robber, eh? What a dirty thief! Count your fingers after that bloke shakes 'ands with you. Talk about Ali Baba! I told 'em: 'I only cracked that pane o' glass: somebody else broke it.' I said: 'I won't pay. I'll demand a court martial', I said. I said: 'You got no right to stop me no dollar for a cracked pane o' glass.' No more they 'aven't. They won't let you live."

"Who reported you?"

"Sarnt Edgeworth. Promotion, that's what that swine's after. I told 'im straight to 'is face: 'You snotty-nosed toerag'—I told 'im right out—'You lousebound lousebag, I'll get you for that'. I said it right out, God's honour I did; right on the plate, bang. You know me. 'Im and 'is tart!" Bennett laughs.

"What tart?" asked Madison, without much interest.

"Gingerish sort o' tart. Supposed to be going straight with Edgeworth. Garh! Straight. Them and their straight pieces. I seen square-pushes before like that. I know 'em, Joe: they can't kid me. They can kid gloves, but they can't kid me. You know me, Joe. Y'ought to see. I see 'em out together las' week—arm-in-arm. What a burke that bloke made of 'imself! Kittie, that's 'er name, Kittie. Married woman, I 'eard—gingerish, cattish-looking sort o' bride—lovely pair of legs; they reach all the way up to 'er bum. Puts on a sort o' walk . . . wiggle, wiggle—you know." Bennett tries to demonstrate. Madison grunts:—

"Turn it up."

"Well, sort of like that kind of style—showing out. Prob'ly don't wear drawers or somethink. A smashing-looking tart, mind you; but a square-push? *Garghh!* Common as a . . . a . . . a telephone. Anybody's meat that can lay out a quid on a bit of a bracelet or a pair o' stockings. You know me, Joe; I got eyes. So she's got Edgeworth by the——"

Madison interrupts: "What're you breaking your head over Edgeworth for?"

"Me? I'm just telling you. What's the matter with *you*? It's funny, that's all; funny what bloody mugs blokes are when it comes to a tart. She's got Edgeworth by . . ."

Bennett says something that might be descriptive of a foul wrestling-hold.

"... Tight," he goes on. "Twisting 'em round 'n round.

Pity, all the same: Edgy was all right when 'e was a Corporal. Some mugs . . . eh? They can be as strong as Sampson but they can't carry a bit o' tape. All said 'n done, women 're no bloody good to a feller. I don't know. Where's the mentality of some poor sods? Do you like ginger women, Joe?"

Madison mutters: "I'm a married man: she's fair."

"Yes, I know, but I mean to say . . ."

Madison throws away his cigarette-end in such a way that Bennett can see that he wishes also to drop the subject. But nothing can stop Bennett when he wants to talk, which is almost always. "I'm a married man myself," he says. "But after all . . . I mean to say . . . Take my case——"

"Who wants to know?" says Madison.

"There was a bit, back in——"

Bennett catches Madison's glance, sombre and sour. He twists his mouth, jerks a nonchalant shoulder, and is silent for ten seconds. Then he says: "Joe."

"Well?"

"You know me?"

"Well?"

"I speak my mind?"

"Well?"

"Well, you're a funny feller, Joe."

"Why?"

"I don't know, but you're a funny feller. That's all. Hey—look!"

A car has passed, wrapped in a trailing grey muffler of dust.

"What?" asks Madison.

"General Eagles," says Bennett. "Didn't you notice the flag. I see 'is 'ead as it passed. Ole Tomtit. I wouldn't mind 'is job."

"Don't be a bloody fool."

"Whaddaya mean, bloody fool?"

"You couldn't be a Quarter-Bloke, let alone a General. You couldn't even be a Colonel."

"What? Because I don't talk with me mouth full of 'ot potatoes, so I *couldn't*?"

"Course you couldn't."

"With training I could."

"*With* training, can you map-read?"

"Joe, for crying out loud, what's that got to do with the price o' coal? Can Tomtit map-read? Maybe yes, maybe no: but Tomtit can kind of get a bloke what *can* to do it *for* 'im."

"Bennett," says Madison, "in Civvy Street, are you or are you not a——"

"—I'm an 'lectrician, and you bloody know it."

"And would you know if your gaffer was an electrician or a bloody pastrycook?"

"Would I bloody know!"

"And if you was a working electrician and found out that your gaffer didn't know a . . . a 'lectric light from a steak-and kidney pudden? . . . Eh?"

"That's not the same thing."

"It is the same thing."

"No it isn't."

"Yes it is."

Bennett growls: "What's the use o' talking?"

"Then shut up," says Madison. "I never asked to talk."

Bennett, who must have the last word, says: "Look at Len 'Arvey fight. Give Len red tabs and 'e'd be a General. What trick don't 'Arvey know? Come on—what trick don't 'Arvey know?"

"Stop talking wet, Olly. A ring's a ring and a desert's a desert. I'd take on Tomtit in a ring," says Madison, "and I'd take Len Harvey on in a desert. But not the other

way round. And you know it, so stop talking crap."

Bennett's last word, now, is "Tripehound," uttered with fierce disdain. Yet at this very moment, if they only knew it, General Eagles in his car is thinking about boxing.

He is an ugly little man in the fifties—he cannot be a day older than fifty-four, but life has not been easy for him. His face is so marked with lines that he might have gone through fifty-odd panes of glass instead of fifty-odd years. His upper lip is powdered with all that the barber's clippers have left of a white moustache and his little battered face is well-worn—worn sharp like a good old knife that has improved in use. If his mouth is a slit, it is a wholesome slit: it was never lipless; only Eagles has pressed his lips away because he had no need of them. They were superfluous, so he has tucked them away. In repose, he still looks vigorous, and if you see how he cocks his head you understand in a flash exactly why he is called "Tomtit". When he talks he makes a noise like a bird that has learned to bark, and his manner is not gracious. He is what they call Reserved—he is reserving himself, holding himself face-down as an ace-in-the-hole, not giving himself away.

General Eagles knows, now, that he has come toe-to-toe with the Ultimate. And his head is strangely empty. Nobody has ever seen him so still. As I have said, he is thinking of boxing. He is tired, this dangerous little man, and he thinks through the woolly folds of a half-dream. He sees himself as a boy of twelve, battered and bruised, struggling against tears of anger and pain; and he is in a field. There is a pink smudge of faces. Somebody shouts *Time!* He raises his hands, which feel terribly heavy: one of them is bleeding. He is fighting another boy, a big fat boy. Something hits him and he falls; rises, falls again, rises and rushes in. Now he is weeping, but still fighting. A voice well known to him shouts: "Left!—use your left, Jack, for

goodness' sake!" Somebody calls "Time," and he sees the glint of afternoon light on a metal watch. Again the voice says "Time!" He comes out of his corner. An eternity rolls away on a rumble of thunder, and the fat boy is down; but he rises, red as a harvest moon. Eagles strikes again. He knows that all he has to give is in this last blind blow; but as he reels, he hears a roar—"Out!" The Saxons shouted "Out" at Stamford Bridge, he thinks; and then he sees the fat boy lying face-down on the grass, and so, with something between a sob and a laugh, falls down and down, twisting and turning in unearthly vortices of twilit mist, until he catches himself and drags himself back to the car in which he is riding, sick for want of sleep.

And he says to himself: "Up, up!" His nails grip his palms and his teeth catch his lower lip. He knows that he must be cool, for he is in a clinch with Despair. There is nobody to call Time, and even if there were it would be a word thrown away, because the Old Man With The Scythe is holding the watch on the side of the enemy. General Eagles believes, at this moment, that his hour has come. He feels like a condemned man who, having bitten his nails and shuffled his feet at a monotonous procession of days that seem to last for ever, comes out of a deep sleep to hear the heavy whirr of a clock about to strike and knows that in a second or two he will hear heavy footsteps in a stone passage . . .

Alas, alas, he has seen a time to weep and a time to laugh; a time to mourn and a time to dance; a time to cast away stones and a time to gather stones; a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing; a time to get and a time to lose; a time to keep . . . and now, a time to cast away. He must cast himself away; but this thought gives him no regret, for he has been playing Squash with himself for many years, hurling himself against a wall, catching him-

self on the bounce, knocking himself back again and wearing himself out for the sake of a certain game which God wills that he must play. Now, it seems to Eagles that all must be lost. He, as a man, does not care a great deal. But, as a player, he thinks with anguish of the pride of his Team—he knows no better way of considering the complicated entanglements of tradition and loyalty bundled together under the label of *Democracy*. He is not a man alone, but Captain of an Eleven, hoping against hope and gathering himself in a fading afternoon for one last terrible effort.

And he feels sick in the head, sick and tired and exceedingly lonely. He has said good-bye to his wife. She is still in his mind: a handsome woman of fifty who can pass, in a bad light, as an exceptionally well-preserved thirty-six and who, even in hard daylight, does not look much more than forty. Yet you would not like her face: it is the face of a woman who for half a century has never felt anything more painful than a headache, or anything more exhilarating than the thrill of vanity gratified. She is a blonde, aquiline, long-faced, heavy-eyed woman; every intonation of her voice and gesture of her fine fingers makes unarguably clear the fact that there is nothing in the world she does not take for granted. She dresses with highly expensive simplicity, wears no jewels except one diamond above her wedding-ring; it is quite clear that she is more deeply concerned with a speck of decay on one of her excellently-preserved teeth than with the destinies of nations and the rot of civilisation. It is said of her that she is blameless, and that she is a bitch: both of these things are true of her. Eagles, who can never think of her without a strange little sick ache, takes his good cold regimental mind back an hour or so . . .

He remembers how he reached out to where her perfectly-gloved hand lay on the table between them. Shutting his eyes he can see the white glove, and his own veinous

dark fingers hesitating, wavering, as if they were not certain whether the white hand is white-hot or white with frost. Gently, he touches her knuckles with his finger-tips. Instantly, her hand slides away and unnecessarily adjusts her other glove. The two gloved hands, charmingly folded, go to rest in her lap. He hears his voice saying:—

"My dear, take care of yourself. I'm worried about that throat of yours. Gargle, you must gargle . . ."

Her voice, thin and cold and clear as the ring of a glass replies: "Why, dear, how silly you are to worry!"

And she looks anxiously at the clock.

"Would you rather I went now?"

"Oh, my dear! I must make the most of such time as I have with you, mustn't I? Now don't forget, Theodore, do try and sleep at least *sometimes*. And promise faithfully that you'll try and smoke a little less. Promise?"

He nods and says: "I promise."

Silence. The clock ticks. He rises and says: "Well . . . God bless you, my dear, until we meet again. I think I'll go now."

"Good-bye, dearest," she says, and they shake hands. He remembers how she glanced at her glove; his hand might have been dirty, for smokers are men of dust and ashes . . .

"*Ah-ahum!*" he coughs, sitting up in the car and shaking himself like a terrier. He pokes a hand into a pocket, pulls out a burnt-up little briar pipe and fills it from a pouch that cost ninepence two years ago. The time has come when he must work things out, and this is done with the aid of a pipe of tobacco. But as he fits the stem of the pipe between his worn teeth which are still strong in biting although they are yellow like the teeth of an old dog, he pauses, frowns, remembers something and puts the pipe back into his pocket.

It is true that he did not promise to stop smoking—only to try and smoke less. But Eagles was never a man to live by the letter of written or unwritten law.

Until tonight, at least he will think without smoking. He puts his pipe back in his mouth and chews the stem, but drops his tarnished old nickel-plated lighter into a breast-pocket; it is conceivable that he may forget, but the effort of fumbling will make him remember.

Tonight, perhaps, he will smoke. Until then he will worry the mouthpiece of the pipe and suck in a dry memory of tobacco.

The car moves slower and almost stops. A long line of powerful trucks rolls in front of him. The General's car seems to gather itself and then rushes forward. Blurred by dust, like a figure in a smudged wood-cut, a sentry stands, presenting arms. Eagles rides on into the dust-cloud.

The sentry's right heel rejoins his left, while his left hand beats a rattling noise out of the butt of his rifle and his right hand cuts away.

The Sergeant on guard says to the Corporal: "Bloody Tomtit. In and out at all hours. One of these days he'll meet himself coming home!"

"They say 'e's 'ot," says the Corporal.

"Hot? Keeps the officers on the hop till they don't know whether they're on their arse or their head. Got the knighthood back in 1930—same year Darkie Knight got fifty-six days for knocking off blankets."

"What I mean, is 'e *somebody*?" asks the Corporal.

The Sergeant replies: "Sort of a regular soldier. Been about a bit. Done all right in the last do. . . . Got a D.S.O., or something; Gallipoli or somewhere. Some bull-and-boloney. Oh . . . there's worse, there's worse unburied."

He sees Bennett and Madison approaching and says: "Where they been?"

The Corporal asks: "Ain't that Bennett?"

"Glasshouse-wallah."

"Went absent, eh?"

The Sergeant nods. "Yup," he says, "absent fourteen days."

Bennett and Madison walk into camp. The Sergeant grunts: "Hi, Bennett!"

"'Lo Sarnt!"

As the two men walk on, the Corporal says: "You never can tell. I nearly went absent meself, when I 'eard my old woman was in dock and I was doing fourteen days C.B. . . . Only I got a telegram in the nick of time."

"Hey," says the Sergeant, "look who's coming."

Another man comes in. He walks with long, slow swinging strides—a big fair man with white eyebrows and a straw-coloured moustache twisted up over a twisted-down mouth. He looks sullen and angry. He is a sergeant, but you can see, above the *V* of the upper stripe, a patch which marks the place where a little crown used to be; and this means to say that not long ago, he wore the stripes-and-crown of a Company Quarter-Master-Sergeant.

The Sergeant on guard hails him: "Aha, Doughty!"

Doughty talks without moving his lower lip: "What's new?"

"New? Nothing."

"Seen Edgeworth?"

"Not back yet. Want him?"

"Me?" says Doughty. "I don't want him."

A bugle blows. Doughty walks into camp. The Corporal says:—

"Women make more bloody trouble than they're worth."

"Some do, some don't. I could trust my old woman with Rudolph Valentino," says the Sergeant.

"That ginger bit certainly made a difference to Doughty and Edgeworth, though. Why, a little while ago they was as happy as a couple of pigs in sh—t."

The Sergeant spits. "Edgeworth had no right to interfere with Doughty's tart."

"*Doughty's tart!*" The Corporal laughs.

"Officers!" snaps the Sergeant, and clicks his tongue at the nearest sentry, who springs to attention and slaps the butt of his rifle in a salute as Pryde and Mann walk in. When the two Lieutenants have passed, the Corporal says:—

". . . But when they get that way bolts and bars won't 'old them. Ever 'ad a dog?"

"Men ain't dogs."

"What about women? Eh?"

The Sergeant growls: "It'd be a bad job if you had to chain up a woman, like a bitch, whenever she was ready to stand to a dog. But nark it . . ."

Edgeworth is coming. He is walking as if a sack of earth hung on each of his ankles. The Sergeant says: "Hi, Edgey!"

Edgeworth makes a vague, triangular sign in the air with his right hand and smiles one-sidedly.

"Without wanting to change places," says the Sergeant, "I wouldn't mind going where he's going just now . . ."

Edgeworth, as the Sergeant on guard knows, is going to the Mess, out of the dusty white light into a dim interior; into the drinking-pool of the Great Carnivora of the Other Ranks. It is not much of a place: a hut, containing chairs, a ping-pong table, some card-tables of magazines and periodicals, and a bar. Heavy hands have tried to decorate the hut. There are chintz curtains. One of the walls bears

the stuffed head of a wart-hot, on the mounting of which is a brass-plate with an inscription which ought to say: *Shot by Captain D. D. Dwan, September 1903*. But somebody has stuck a strip of stamp-paper over the first two words. Two Sergeants, sweating copiously, are playing ping-pong. A Company Sergeant-Major with a waxed moustache is reading a back number of *The Lady*; he is reading greedily, holding down with his left elbow an old fly-blown issue of *Vogue*. There is a picture on the cover of *Vogue*, of a beautiful young woman in a fur hat, but somebody with a fountain-pen has given her a moustache and covered her chest with hair. Four or five sergeants are involved in vociferous discussion. Doughty is there, sitting alone, rocking back precariously on the hind legs of a collapsible chair.

Edgeworth, without buying a drink, stands at the fringe of the group of talking men.

Sergeant Gillette, a fleshless man with long, narrow, widely-spaced teeth like a coarse comb, is saying:—

“All right. Win, lose, or draw—I’ve wore myself out putting a bit of heart into my platoon. They’re jarred off sitting on their back-sides, and so am I. Have a go and chance it, I say.”

Sergeant Newdigate, slow-talking and heavy-faced, says: “Chance it? Chance it, you twirp? Chance it, you twillip? What is this? A game of pokey-die? You can’t take no chances in a thing like this!”

“What do you get by waiting?” asks Sergeant Spore, pushing out his lips until they make the shape of a little trumpet, while his large and prominent eyes flash angrily.

“Ready, that’s what you get; you get ready,” says Newdigate.

And C.Q.M.S. Oxford says: “Grouse, grouse, grouse! You’ll get your bloody bellyful before long!”

"Prove it!" says Gillette.

"What do you know about it? Since when did Tomtit take you into his confidence?" asks Spore.

It is not in Edgeworth's nature to stand by silently while other men talk of matters like this. He picks up a ping-pong ball, a cigarette packet, and an empty match-box, and expounds as he puts them down:—

"Look . . . Jerry's over there. See? We're here. Now look, Jerry's coming towards us . . . Get it?"

Newdigate says: "I get it. All we got to do is, retreat as fast as we can to Cairo, then side-step, and all the Jerries fall into the sea and drown themselves."

"Whooooo!" screams Gillette, and flicks the ping-pong ball with his thumb. The ball rebounds with a hollow rap and hits Sergeant Doughty in the face.

Doughty rises, greyish-white. He crosses the room and stands over Edgeworth. "Were you trying to be funny just then?"

"Me?" says Edgeworth. "I don't get that."

There is a silence. The men stop playing ping-ping. The old C.S.M., old campaigner that he is, smells danger and folds down the Society Column. He gets out of his chair as Doughty flips the ball he has picked up as a boy flips a marble. It bounces off Edgeworth's chin, but Edgeworth does not blink. He only says: "Are you trying to make trouble?"

"Were you trying to take a rise out of me?" asks Doughty.

"Doughty, I didn't even know you were there."

"That's lucky," says Doughty with a sneer.

"I don't want to quarrel with you, Doughty."

With a bark of laughter Doughty says: "That's good!"

Edgeworth, also, is angry. He says: "Am I supposed to be scared of you?"

Their faces are almost touching. But the C.S.M. says:—

"All right. The first man that starts anything, I put him under close arrest the same minute. Now! Now then!"

Sergeant Gillette says: "I chucked that ball, Doughty. It was a sort of bit of tactics."

The C.S.M. knows that the danger is over. He returns to *The Lady*. Doughty walks out of the Mess with a last bitter look at Edgeworth.

Newdigate says: "C'mere, Edgey." They withdraw a few paces. "You can see Doughty's sorting you out. Why don't you take him out on the sand-hills and settle it once and for all? Better be shy five or six teeth than go on that way." But Edgeworth shakes his head and says:—

"Say I did. Say I fought him. If I beat him he'd feel worse than ever, and if he beat me it still wouldn't make any difference. I swear to God, it takes a killing to square this up—that's how Doughty feels about me."

"That wouldn't get him the girl back."

Edgeworth, looking at him sharply, says: "Isn't it marvellous? You can't blow your nose round here without everybody knowing it! . . . All right, what if I do like the girl? Is it my fault if I like the girl? Well?"

"She seems to like you," says Newdigate, tonelessly.

"Well? So what? I never went behind Doughty's back, did I? What is this? A bloody picture-palace? What *am* I? Wallace bloody Beery? If I like her, and she likes me better than she likes Doughty, what am I going to do? He wasn't my best friend, was he? And even so, so what? It isn't the same sort of thing. Even if I'd thought the world of Doughty—and I never did think the world of Doughty . . . Oh, shut up and leave me alone."

But at this point the Regimental Sergeant-Major comes in, accompanied by the Regimental Quarter-Master Sergeant. The R.S.M. looks older than his fifty years: old soldiers always do look older than they are. In the Army,

years of anguish and restraint age a man. . . . He acquires a peculiar kind of healthy senility, somehow comparable with the sag and droop of a cheerful grandmother who has managed to rear a dozen sickly children and who has settled, now, into a steady routine of matriarchal infallibility.

Somebody asks: "When is it to be, sir?"

The R.S.M. says, heavily: "Put your mind at rest, you silly man."

Sergeant Gillette says: "They might trust men like us just a little bit, it seems to me."

The R.S.M., picking the price of one drink out of a handful of small change, says: "Trust? *Trust?* If you had a pocketful of diamonds would you go and trust the lining? Don't be silly." He takes a drink and adds: "I doubt if the General would trust even me."

One of the Sergeants—a worn old soldier in a white jacket—walks towards the door.

Sergeant Spore asks him: "What's for the officers' supper tonight, Ted?"

Ted replies, with hauteur: "Stoo. And *we* call it Dinner!"

Then he goes out.

THREE

BUT can Pryde eat dinner when even the open air sticks in his throat tonight? Stew? One whiff of it fills him up and a forkful chokes him. Twitching and gasping for breath like a landed fish, he finds relief only in great gulps of cold water. The arrival of the coffee makes Pryde's heart beat faster: his whole soul cries out for release. He tells himself that, as soon as decency permits, he will get up

and run away over the sand-hills until he is tired; then walk back and sleep.

But Mann is unnaturally cheerful. He has been talking to an earnest young Intelligence Officer who is said to understand thirty languages—a Bryonic boy with a big, pure white forehead and a pink face.

“There is something I have wondered about,” says Mann. “You *are* fairly fluent in Slavonic languages, Captain Nourish?”

Captain Nourish, superciliously smiling says:—“Moderately.”

“Then can you translate this?” asks Mann, and hands over a slip of paper.

The Intelligence Officer looks, reads, frowns, and blinks. He is not much liked, for he is a know-all. Everybody awaits his discomfiture.

He shakes his head and shrugs his shoulders, passing the paper to Captain Inch. Inch, a bulky and powerful man with a round fresh face like an apple, grins. He exchanges glances with Mann; says nothing, passes the paper to the next man, and smiles broadly.

In his slender and elegant handwriting, Mann has written the following lines:—

Svidjanili afromsanit anisi
Yorlava Veniusi svidjanili
Idchlitobodi siniginimar-iliol
Ogatinisatusi svidjanili.

Nourish shakes his head again, and talks of dialects; suspects Ottoman influence; hints at strange talk among Montenegrins, and in a roundabout way admits defeat. Then Mann pulls out another bit of paper, saying:—“This is the key. I took it down as I heard a man singing it in

Montenegro—I beg pardon, Captain Nourish, not Montenegro; I mean Düsseldorf—in the 1930's."

The other paper says:—

*"Sweet Jennie Lee from sunny Tennessee
You'll love her when you see Sweet Jennie Lee,
Each Little bird is singing merrily, all
Getting set to see Sweet Jennie Lee."*

Nourish curls a Byronic lip as the others laugh. Pryde is in a fever of impatience: he touches a high, jagged peak of irritation. Then, falling into the emotional snow and ice of that wretched and lonely remoteness, becomes numb, but not calm; cold and stiff. He is ready for anything now, even a few words from the Colonel who is the worst speaker in the world. But no few official words are said. The Malacca moustache shoves itself forward; the white eyebrows seem to run together at the bottom of the sloping forehead. A silence has fallen upon the Mess. The Colonel's mouth opens and closes. One expects those big square teeth to rattle like maraccas in a Cuban band. But the Colonel instead of speaking does something so terribly impressive that not one of the officers present ever forgets it: he glares from left to right with his bright and angry eyes, and smiles. Yes, he smiles, and then—as if this were not enough—he lets out a short, almost girlish laugh. . . . "Nnn-hnn!—" like a bride-to-be when her best friends whisper secrets.

And Pryde feels something like a spatter of warm water on the back of his hand. It is a large drop of sweat off his forehead.

With a sigh so deep that he almost rises into the air, Pryde realises that the evening is ending. . . .

He looks at Mann. Hazlitt, seeing him, thinks: "Little

Pryde's got it in for Billy Mann," and—deciding where he is going to offer his support in the event of a feud—winks at Mann, whose eyes are engaged elsewhere. The fact of the matter is that Pryde, having a black dog on his shoulder, needs help. Lord Hazlitt has hold of the wrong end of the stick: it is Pryde who needs help.

•Hazlitt glances from face to face, and smiles, remembering that there was a time when he watched faces with intent to diagnose a tendency to soft-heartedness in the matter of post-dated cheques and promissory notes. And now—can such things be?—he is hoping that somebody may ask him for a fiver, so that he will have the chance to say: "Five? . . . Take twenty!"

Soon, Mann and Pryde are gone. A thick and woolly dullness descends on the Mess. Men begin to remember things they have to do. Hazlitt pauses to exchange light conversation with the Adjutant before strolling away to smoke a fat cigarette under the stars and watch the pungent smoke hanging like cobwebs in the ghostly light: he finds life altogether pleasant.

The Adjutant, a charming young man with a moustache like two kittens' tails and the profile of a Ouida guardsman, goes to finish a letter he has been writing to his parents: he wants to add a postscript:—"Please tell Partridge to send a pot of that mauve-coloured shaving-cream and two bottles of his After-Shave Lotion—he knows the kind I always have. Tell Effie I'll write as soon as I get the chance. Love, Herbert." He is a good boy, properly devoted to his small and happy family; an efficient soldier, a Regular Army man who, having got the postscript off his mind, sits down and gives himself over to joyous waking dreams of glory in the face of death.

But Pryde, walking beside Mann in the late evening, holds himself tense, and has an air of anguish and pre-

occupation mixed with shame . . . he reminds Mann of a shy youth who suffers hideous discomforts because he cannot bring himself to ask the way to the lavatory.

"Well, old fellow?" asks Mann.

"Well what?"

"I thought you wanted to tell me something?"

"I . . . it's nothing. I've changed my mind. It's nothing. There's nothing to tell you."

"As you please," says Mann, in his gentle voice.

Pryde says: "It's all very well for you to——" Then he stops, hesitates, and starts again: "Do you know what that confounded M.O. had the bloody impudence to insinuate yesterday?"

"No. What?"

"That I was malingering."

"Really?"

"You saw his attitude today?"

"Probyn-Tweed's always like that, old fellow."

"Is he? I think not. I went to him as anybody might, with a bit of a sick stomach. And he as good as told me I was . . ."

"Oh, come, Pryde, come!"

"But why? Why?" asks Pryde, between his teeth. "Do I *look* as if I wanted to get out of anything? Do I?"

"*Don't* be an idiot, my *dear* fellow!"

"Answer my question, Mann."

"Well, then, no you don't. Quite the reverse."

"That's not true, Mann—you don't mean that. Everybody seems to think——"

"Pryde! Better get hold of yourself."

Pryde grits his teeth and says: "Well, the actual fact of the matter is——"

"Um-hm?"

"My nerves have been a bit upset, that's all. Nothing more than that."

"Why, naturally, Pryde old fellow! Whose nerves aren't?"

"Well then . . ." Pryde stops again, and this time he says nothing more until Mann speaks again.

A bugle sounds. "Was that all you had to tell me?" asks Mann.

"What else should there be?"

"Nothing else at all. Why should there be anything else? I don't know, Pryde. You told me you wanted to tell me something——"

"Yes, I know I did. And you said you knew, or guessed, or something. What did you mean by that, exactly, anyway?"

"What I said."

"You could guess what I had to tell you?"

"Yes, I think so."

"Then that's that!" snaps Pryde. You mean to say you can——" But he cannot go on: the words won't come out.

Mann has placed a light hand on Pryde's shoulder, and now he says, in a voice which has cooled and set: "Pryde. Go to bed and go to sleep."

"Sleep! Ha!"

"Yes, sleep. You'll sleep. Go to bed now, Pryde, and you'll sleep."

"What a fool I was to start this talk!"

"No you weren't, Pryde. Now don't say any more. I understand what it's all about. I'll tell you one thing."

"What?"

With extreme deliberation Mann says: "It is not one quarter as bad as you think—this trouble of yours. I know that you're suffering hell. I know that you're going to go through a season in hell. But I give you my word of honour,

Pryde, my word of honour that it'll come out well for you once and for all. My word of honour!"

As Mann's voice has become clear and firm, Pryde's voice has softened. He says:—"I'm sorry to have been so damned discourteous, Mann. I snapped at you like a dog. Do forgive me. I'm sorry, and I beg your pardon."

"Bed now," says Mann.

"I'll go now. And Mann—thank you."

"Silly fellow," says Mann. "God bless you. Good-night, old fellow."

"Good-night, Mann. . . . I say."

"Um?"

"I hope you get out of this mess alive."

"Thanks, Pryde, thanks. I shall. So will you."

"I don't much care if I don't," says Pryde. "Good-night." And he goes to his bed, preparing for another wretched night of taut wakefulness. *Can Mann know?* he asks himself, as he undresses. *Does my face tell everybody that I am a damned coward? Do I look as I feel—sick with fear?* He lays out cigarettes and matches. There can be no sleep for him now; no hope of sleep. He is certain that he must lie and listen to nothing, and torment himself with the conviction that when the moment comes for action he will be paralysed . . . his heart will beat in his belly and his throat will close tight while his nerves sag loose; although his reason will spit down at him in disgust his body will die one of the thousand deaths before the grave, and he will be shamed for ever.

All night long he will ask himself: "Of what *am* I afraid? Death? . . . No! Pain? . . . No!" Pryde dreads these shadowy soliloquies; they end where they began, and start all over again:—"Of *what* am I afraid?"

The answer is: Nothing. Simply that he is afraid: Fear is his Familiar—it is always with him, half a pace behind

him, playing with him, clawing his hair on end. All his life, Pryde has been on the run, glancing back over his shoulder. And he knows that now Fear is running shoulder-to-shoulder with him . . . and that very soon Fear will glide ahead of him and at a certain moment turn and show him its blind, blank, stupefying face . . . And then . . .

Yes: he is desperately afraid—of Fear.

Pryde gets into bed. Mann was right: within a minute or two he is fast asleep, with his neglected light still burning.

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Yet it is not late. In the huts most of the men are awake. A soldier lying on the cot next to Madison's is chewing a pencil and shaking his head. He is a Birmingham man, a fly boy with ideas, and his name is Townskip. Big, sleek, dark, sly and knowing, Townskip ought to have made a fortune years ago: he is thirty-five years old, at least: a buyer-and-seller, a man in the know, wise to everything and acquainted with kindred spirits who can get things wholesale at any hour of the day or night. Yet somehow things have gone amiss. Townskip was always right: only God was wrong. And the Law is an ass, into the bargain.

Now, he looks up and says: "Oh Blimey! What a smasher of an idea to go'n and get 't a time like this!"

"Uh?" says Madison.

"Models," says Townskip. "Toys. There's a dead shortage o' kids' toys. Well—models."

"What models?" asks Bennett.

But Townskip winks and nods, runs his tongue round his teeth, makes a juicy noise, and says: "Ahhh!" He isn't talking. This is too good to talk about. He shuts his eyes and concentrates. . . . Children want toys. Good. There's a war on. Good. Tanks, aeroplanes, submarines are all the

go. Good. There's a shortage of wood and labour. Good. Right. The scheme ripens . . . Print scale-model diagrams: sell them for a shilling a pattern. Kid people on, that anybody can make toys at home with a penknife and a few sticks of firewood. Pattern costs a penny-farthing to print. With an envelope, and what not—say twopence. Good. Profit, 600%. Call it 500%. Call it 400%, even. Kids make their own toys, whole model fleets. Townskip sees himself in the finest bit of suiting that money can buy, getting a girl exactly like Betty Grable drunk on double gins-and-limes. He can buy his own printing-press in due course . . . then another press. After the war he can start a little dog-racing leaflet . . . a Genuine Turf Information Service, also. And look at the market for pictures of naked women! All the magazines have them. A little book of Art Studies . . . legal, harmless; but advertise in the papers:—Genuine French Art Studies; Naughty But Nice; For Adults, Artists, and Doctors Only. . . . "Sir Ted Townskip, the multi-millionaire . . ." Pop! . . . Pop!—Champagne all round at Claridge's Hotel!

"What a time to think up a smashing scheme like that!" he cries. "I got a bleeding fortune in my 'ead—a million o' money!"

"'E's off again," says Bennett.

"Soppy Brummagem git," says a man called Roast, grimly scratching a hard-grained blue chin with knitty hand.

Townskip says: "Mugs like you, you live in poverty and you'll die in poverty."

"I'll die where I bloody like," says Roast.

"You'll die in the pawnshop," says Townskip.

Roast replies: "You'll die in y'r bed—y'old woman 'll die in pawnshop pledging y'trousers."

"Yes?" says Townskip, "That's what you think." He

taps his head. "I got a million o' money there, mug."

"Whoy doy at all?" asks a mild, smiling, ox-headed Leicester man, whose name is Eddie Blood.

"'Ark at Bloody Ed," says Bennett. "Kafoozalem—'e wants to live for ever."

"Methuselah," grunts Madison. "Not Kafoozalem, Methuselah."

"Oh all right, all right. Bible-Class we got 'ere; Band o' bleeding 'Ope."

"Blasphemy! Blasphemy!" says Townskip, threatening Bennett with the wrath of heaven by pointing to the electric light.

"Blasphemy! . . . Eyewash," says Bennett. "When you're dead you're dead and done with, finished."

"Quoight roight," says Blood. "When yow doys yow doys; when yow snoof it yow're boogered: so whoy doy?"

"Savages," says Townskip. "Cannibals!"

Bennett shouts:—"The trouble with the working classes——"

But Sergeant Doughty interrupts, sitting up in bed:—"Turn it up, you bellowing belly-aching poxy-Red-Indian! What d'you know about working classes, you chancer? And another thing—next time you skive a cookhouse fatigue I'll put you in the Report. Working-classes!"

"Do yow believe yow goes to 'Eav-ern when yow doy, Sarnt?"

"I don't believe in anything. What do you want to go to Heaven for anyway, you soft lump?"

"Oi don't, Sarnt."

"Go to hell then, or go to sleep. Godamighty," says Sergeant Doughty, "What is this bloody Army coming to?"

Lights Out sounds.

"—It'd be koind o' creepy," says Blood, in explanation.

"Out them lights!" snaps Doughty.

The lights go out.

In the dark the men lie and edge themselves into position for sleep. Doughty lies still, like a man on reconnaissance. Townskip digs and grunts. Eddie Blood moans once and then lets out a great *Kkkhhhaaaan-akhaaangh-Pfoof!* of preliminary snoring before settling down to a noisy night of it. Roast lies and wonders: "Has she dropped the kid yet? Are they both alive? God, what a cushy time I'm having when you look at her!" He is thinking of his wife, a big Bedfordshire country-girl who gives birth to babies as smoothly and painlessly as a collapsible tube gives out tooth-paste. Roast hates to think of childbirth: his mother died when he was born, and his father beat him for it later on and called him a murdering tyke . . .

Madison broods in his heavy way for a few minutes: he wishes his wife were beside him and snaps broad awake for five bad seconds as the thought comes into his mind that he may never see her again . . .

Several hundred yards away, Captain Probyn-Tweed, who has had only six hours' sleep in the last two days, takes off his shoes and thinks of his own wife, a green-eyed woman whom he won in 1928 and lost in 1931 to a gay young architect in a check suit. Where is she now? . . . But what does he care? She had a tubercular diathesis. . . . But how can that concern him? It was all a mistake, a folly, a midsummer madness; something to be cut away and grafted over with new skin. It is ended. It is forgotten. Yet what is this sensation of pain in his heart . . . this sickness and loneliness? He looks at his harsh cold, deathly-calm face in the mirror; looks at his tongue; sighs, and falls asleep in his chair.

Hazlitt, unable to sleep is whistling very softly and melodiously, making up a kind of tango. His soul is full of gentle peace. He could embrace the earth and kiss the

stars and soar up singing his heart out like the first skylark in the clean dawn of the world . . . and so he falls asleep.

And Mann, next door, is kept awake by Conscience, tapping like a poltergeist in the dark cellars of his mind. Could he have helped Pryde? Is Pryde lying in an anguish that Mann might have alleviated? No . . . yes? Yes . . . no? Mann doesn't know. He never does know. He picks up the *Albatross Book of Living Verse*, opens it at random and reads:—

And the high gods took in hand
Fire and the falling of tears,
And a measure of sliding sand
From under the feet of the years;
And froth and the drift of the sea;
And dust of the labouring earth;
And bodies of things to be
In the houses of death and of birth. . . .

His eyes, being tired, slip away and fall down the page of measured lines . . .

Eyesight and speech they wrought
For the veils of the souls therein . . .

Mann yawns unhappily . . .

In his heart is a blind desire
In his eyes foreknowledge of death;
He weaves, and is clothed with derision;
Sows, and he shall not reap;
His life is a watch or a vision
Between a sleep and a sleep . . .

Mann puts out the light, takes off his glasses, and sleeps.

Sleep is picking them off one by one. *Maybe I'll be able to get at him out there*, thinks Doughty, and closes his bitter eyes . . .

Edgeworth slumbers, his head in the crook of his right arm, looking dreadfully like an unhappy child . . .

The Colonel, having put his moustache in a species of hammock tied at the back of his head, swears a muttered prayer and, grunting, lowers his anxious mind on to a fakir's spiked bed of alertness and lets his body relax.

The Camp Guard stands and watches the dark.

The General also is awake.

His coat is off and his skinny brown arms are bare. His small, bony head aches a little. He rubs his temples with his fingers. Then he tries to concentrate on a map in front of him. It is a map of an emptiness. Across one side there runs an irregular line of coast. The rest is a blank, which even on paper, looks desolate. Across this plan of a nothingness he has drawn certain lines. Following one of these lines, now, with his pencil, he strengthens it. Idly, like a man swept away on an irresistible current of thought, he makes another line of dots close together, and he follows this dotted line up and down with his pencil. Only the shadow of the pencil-point touches the paper. Stunned with weariness, he stares at this moving shadow and, half hypnotised, sees it in his mind as the shadow of a wing-tip of an aeroplane—also following a dotted line; and this dotted line is made up of distant lorries moving . . . crawling like ants up an interminable road through a barren wilderness towards a hazy distance.

The dust clouds hide the lorries, and the desert is only a paper desert again, and the wing-tip a pencil. The General shakes his head, like a dog. But the tiredness

clings. He looks at his watch. Now, at last, he permits himself to light his pipe. He must sleep. Awake, weary, as he is, he feels that he can do nothing. He arranges a block of dashes that represent guns. But the paper swims, and the wrong things come into his mind.

His knuckles rap the table . . . And he sees before him a door, and his hand is a younger hand—his own, protruding from a starched cuff. The door opens. He sees, in a long mirror, a reflection of himself in an evening coat. Alas! Even then he looked older than his years, weathered and dried-out, aged by discipline. There is a woman in the room: his wife, a bride, clothed in white. He kisses her, sees that her face is frozen with aversion, and he says: "Oh!"—like a shocked child, and, stepping back a pace, instinctively and ridiculously stands to attention . . .

And then he feels himself falling and falling, to a hellish accompaniment of wailing music, down and down, twisting and turning in vortices of smoky mist while a Voice pursues him:—*But I never did love you! You were forced on me! I don't think I even like you! Why don't you go away?*

Then silence, and out of the silence another Voice, unlike any earthly voice—something like the last reverberations of an immense bronze gong, but clearly articulate—saying:—

You must live alone, and die alone. You must always be alone. But it shall be your destiny to lead great bands of comrades along the high wire between Death and Life. You must be no man and yet you must be all men. You must give away your heart for a guiding light, your soul for a driving force. You must give yourself to to-morrow. You must be great.

And then he feels as if he is flying, like a rocket. Something bursts in a white shower of sparks, and he rushes

down through a blackness and crashes awake again at his desk. He looks at his watch and is astonished. He opens the blinds and sees the dawn beginning to break—a coppery dawn which, as he looks, seems to sing out in an exultant coppery note. Reveille is sounding.

General Eagles clears his throat and says aloud:—
“To-day we march.”

Sergeant Edgeworth is roaring at his men:—“Get a heave on! Come on, get out of it! Get a rift on, you idle men! Don’t stand idle there, get a jazz on! Put a jerk on it, you shower of dead men! A little life into it, you slugs! Thank God we’ve got a navy! I won’t tell you again, Smith!”

But Private Smith will not stop singing. Nothing but a cut throat can stop soldiers’ singing.

“Old Tomkins he came home one night
As tight as tight could be,
And saw a head upon his bed
Where his head ought to be.
‘My dearest wife wot is that head
Where my head ought to be’
—‘Oh that is just a loaf of bread
I brought to bed with me’.

Three more raucous voices take up the chorus:—

“I’ve travelled far,
I’ve travelled wide,
And sights I’ve seen a score,
But ‘ear-’oles on a loaf of bread
I’ve never seen before . . .”

At the same time a boy is singing *Trees*, an old soldier is bellowing *Six Lessons from Madame La Zonga* (the only other word of which appears to be *Conga*), a corporal is howling *You'll be far better off in a Home*, and one of the most atrocious baritone voices in the whole of Africa is chanting *Down Mexico Way*.

Dusty Smith breaks off his song to ask: "Do we get a special breakfast?"

"Why should you?" asks Edgeworth.

"An army marches on its stomach, Sergeant."

"March on your stomach? So help me God, I'll jump on your bloody stomach!"

A long, sardonic collier asks: "Will there be a hut inspection?"

Several men laugh, but Edgeworth says: "No there won't be, but I want this hut tidied up before we leave it."

There is a murmur, and somebody says: "That'll push Rommel back another ten miles!"

A voice which Edgeworth does not choose to hear, says: "Sir Francis bloody Drake! 'E finishes 'is game of bowls, we finish swabbing the 'ut."

Nevertheless, they sweep the dust away. Then Cook-house blows and the hut is empty. Edgeworth goes out towards the Sergeants' Mess. In the Company area he meets Doughty and says: "Are byegones byegones?"

"Not as long as *you* live," says Doughty.

Now the camp seems empty; only the cookhouses are alive; uproariously alive.

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But the burly Staff Officer named Inch looks as if he had been dead for three days. He is working things out. His job is a strange one. He is a professional misleader, a specialist in all the arts of deception. One lives always

under the scrutiny of an Enemy. In War, the brain of an army must exquisitely combine and co-relate feeling with seeing. In War, as in the game of Poker a subtle bluff may win a pot and laugh at luck. What is Inch? He is the Poker-Face of the General. He has something of the panoramic imagination of a Breughel . . . he can see the world as it were through the eyes of a hostile bird. He knows that the Enemy is watching; watching and noting and relating every detail of this strange and dusty picture.

He knows that the Enemy knows how, blast by blast, truck after truck goes rumbling out until the stupendous convoy goes roaring away under a veil of smoke . . . how the tanks break into thunder and lurch forward . . . how, in the camp, obedient to a word of command, column upon column of men move to their right in threes and step out.

Inch knows that the Enemy sees this first movement. It is his business—as it is the business of a poker-player, a boxer, a swordsman or a diplomat—to make it all bewildering, a colossal and terrible feint.

He sighs.

To-day the hopeless little army of General Eagles hits the desert . . .

FOUR

HOPELESS little army indeed! Men with twice their chance of survival have cut their throats after leaving a note for the Coroner saying that there was no point in going on. Inch may plan elaborate camouflage; but what can be the use of it all? It must be obvious that the ridiculous little army in the Desert can accomplish nothing but its own destruction. Feint! Pretence! Camouflage! The Germans

are not fools. A madman throwing himself into a chasm, may flap his arms as he falls, but nobody is going to believe that he is flying. The British forces are doomed, and Eagles and his men are double-doomed. General Arminius von Osten is reminded of the Mongol proverb: *When the egg contended with the stone, the yolk came out*, and he smiles where he sits in his Headquarters.

He is a dangerous man, this von Osten. German military experts have attributed to him nearly all the military virtues. He is supposed to be as brilliant in theory as von Clausewitz and von Moltke rolled into one, more shrewd and daring in attack than Ludendorff, Hindenburg and Falkenhayn put together. Journalists, half-hysterical with admiration, have likened him to all kinds of brave and clever animals. In far-sightedness Arminius von Osten is an eagle, in cunning he is a serpent . . . they never can get away from those household pets of Zarathustra. Furthermore, he is a bulldog in resolution, a mongoose in defence, a wild boar in ferocity . . . In general, he is fabulously terrible in every imaginable way. Yet people who have interviewed him have been astounded at his polite affability which is charmingly reminiscent of Goering, they say. His Staff Officers agree that he is, unquestionably, a great soldier and a powerful personality. Ah yes, here indeed is a Napoleonic character. Contradicting Arminius von Osten is like shoving your hand into a sackful of hungry ferrets. To argue with him is to feed yourself into a mincing machine and to reduce yourself to a paste under whirling blades of steely logic. Arminius von Osten is destined to become very great: it is a foregone conclusion; people whisper that even Rommel takes care not to tread on this man's corns. Again; he is popular, he has a knack of handling men. Having treated them like dogs, kicking them and wiping his feet on them, he can suddenly give them a pat on the

head, or a few contemptuously jocular friendly words. He is a born leader. There seems to be in his keen mind not the slightest shadow of a doubt that men were born to follow him. He is adroit; knows precisely what he intends to do and how he intends to do it; likes to speak in aphorisms and proverbs, and to combine the gritty remains of a little classical reading with the sweat-salt of army slang and tactical phraseology. Off duty he leads a fairly abstemious life; never drinks more than a half bottle of Rhine wine at a sitting, is coldly courteous to women; never associates with prostitutes or ladies on the loose, and confines himself to the embraces—not very frequently, at that—of one or two fresh young lieutenants, in whose eyes he appears to be considerably greater than God Almighty and next-door-but-one to Adolph Hitler. He is a man's man, tough and clever, feared alike by friends and enemies.

He sits, I say, and smiles. Arminius von Osten is a large, thick-chested man of commanding presence. A women's magazine published in Berlin has described him as "in every way an all-perfect type of fighting Aryan manhood". At fifty he still looks young, although his hair is getting exceedingly thin. Over big, well-covered cheekbones his prominent pale-grey eyes twinkle with something that might be mistaken for good-nature. There are no scars on his clean-shaven jaws.

But most of the other gentlemen there have been more or less hacked about in their determination to prove their manhood. Volkmar von Volkfried wears three Heidelberg slashes on each cheek, like an Ashantee savage with tribal markings; Eisenzahn's face has been seamed and sewn up like a patchwork cushion; and Waldemar has only one scar, but it is a deep one, and must have laid bare the teeth on the left-hand side of his upper jaw. Schmeckegut has no sword marks, but time and anxiety have spoiled his

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face with furrows that resemble the marks of a leopard's claws on a tree-trunk.

But nothing can mark Arminius von Osten.

Nobody smokes here. Unlike Frederick the Great, this General is irritated by the smell of tobacco—as is his Fuehrer. When he smiles, the others also smile. There is a great display of teeth. It is as if the lids of five pianos have been lifted preparatory to the playing of some deafening new music, some evil and unlucky fugue.

"So," says Arminius von Osten. The bent mouths snap straight again like foils in a fencing-bout.

"One expected something a little heavier," he continues. "This is a spit in the ocean. Eagles: he should be named Icarus!"

"Yet he is not a fool," says Schmeckegut.

"Pardon," says von Osten. "On the contrary—he is a fool. He cannot be anything but a fool."

"Could it be a trap?" wonders Schmeckegut.

"What trap?" asks von Osten. "Where a trap? How?"

Volkmar von Volkfried's hungry-looking mouth gnaws off a few words:—"A bent pin to catch a whale."

Von Osten, who regards picturesque metaphor as his own department, looks up sharply and says: "This is not a joke." His tone is icy; his jaws snap together with a ringing click like the slam of a refrigerator-door. "It is still a little early in the day to laugh. In Alexandria, I will laugh with you very heartily: in Cairo I will split my sides. Until then, you will be so kind as to take this campaign seriously. Certain things are understood. The English are outnumbered, outclassed, out-equipped . . . in general, outdated. They are desperate. They are not cowards. I suggest to you that it is less than judicious to ignore the desperation of a brave man: a brave man with nothing to hope for may sometimes do the most extraordinary things.

So please save your laughter for the end of the show. Good?"

Volkmar von Volkfried bites his lips: he is a gentleman, a nobleman, a man of blue blood and princely connections; his family owns land and, on his mother's side, factories. He is not accustomed to being addressed in such a tone; he is in a bad temper; later on, somebody is going to suffer for this. But Arminius von Osten talks on:—

"Apart from this so-very-humorous talk of pins, etcetera, and whales and so forth . . . There can be no trap of any significance. It is not possible for Eagles to reach Sidi-bu-Zibula before that point is reinforced. It is impossible to drive men day and night, and even if it were possible they would drop in their tracks before they reached Sidi-bu-Zibula from the point marked T.A.137. All things are possible, as some philosopher or other is now thinking at the present moment, no doubt . . ." He looks at von Volkfried. ". . . But even assume that it is possible for Icarus Eagles to get there *before* reinforcements arrive; he still cannot take it in three days, five days, or a week."

He pauses, and from behind Waldemar a stocky little man says, in a strong Italian accent: "Never!"

"In affect, an attempt on Sidi-bu-Zibula from Eagles' present position is not the kind of suicide the Enemy will commit. So . . ."

There is a sound of firing, from a great distance. General Arminius von Osten grins, makes a gesture towards the aerial photographs that lie in front of him, and says: ". . . All simply, we proceed direct. And, if I may say so, I believe that we can digest the . . . bent pin, was it, von Volkfried?"

"Bent pin, I believe I said, General," says von Volkfried, green with anger.

The General says: "To abandon these flowers of speech.

Eight tanks can swallow one tank. Five aeroplanes can swallow one aeroplane. A gun of large calibre can swallow a gun of small calibre. A good big man is better than a good little man. So . . ."

The others stand stiffly, sternly expectant. They know that General von Osten is going to say something shocking; his mannerisms are not unfamiliar to them.

The General looks grave. The look in his eyes, now, is unmistakable: there is no good-nature in it. He glances from face to face and says:—

"Get them on the move."

Everybody is astonished. But then the General says:—

"Eisenzhan!"

"General?"

"The pass-word."

"Yes, General?"

"Don't spit over the moon."

His face is rigid as clay. As they go out they hear an uproar in the sky. A British reconnaissance plane seems to have got away. Let it get away. Who surveys a force of Nature? Who applies his eye to God's key-hole? What fool thrusts his hand under the skirts of the Inevitable? Who can side-track the fidelity of Fate? Destiny and Germany have made a love-match: the lady Fortune has, after many experiments, found her bedfellow.

The British forces are lost. They are in the abyss. They are crazily romantic in their resistance, like inter-planetary fliers who hope to defeat the ineluctable laws of gravity and who, aiming at Mars, go whirling down to something less than nothingness in the cosmic dust.

But, in a little while, the aeroplane which has got away comes down, slightly punctured and rather the worse for wear . . . and in due course General Eagles, in a conversational tone, says to a Staff Officer on his left:—

"I suppose you believe in the impossible?"

"No, why?"

"I just wondered. You see, we have to achieve it."

"Well, sir, we always have had to, haven't we?"

"Well, look . . ." General Eagles twirls a cold pipe between his fingers. ". . . If you were me, and you had to choose between a certain death and the millionth part of the ghost of a dog's chance, which would you choose?"

"Me, sir? Why, of course, the millionth part of the ghost."

"Could you give me a match?" General Eagles gets his pipe alight, and says, between puffs: "I know. Well, I'm afraid we are going to go and take Sidi-bu-Zibula."

He sucks very cautiously at his pipe; it must last as long as possible, for he allows himself no more than four pipes a day now. He used to smoke twelve. Pressing a thumb down on the glowing tobacco, General Eagles says: "Well?"

"Excuse me, sir . . . you did say the millionth part of the ghost of a chance?"

"—Of the ghost of a *dog's* chance."

"Oh well, sir, dogs are different."

"Now look . . ." General Eagles musters papers and photographs.

About twenty minutes later, a certain Major-General Lewis-Capet says: "Very good, sir!" And he goes away, composing his face, unaccountably cheerful; a gentleman who has been condemned to death in a good cause.

Meanwhile General Eagles says: "I had better say a few words to the men." He swallows, and adds: "I don't believe there's anything in the world that puts the fear of God into me like this business of saying a few words . . ."

FIVE

So General Eagles manages to say a few words. A famous journalist who is present at the time puts on an expression of reverence, but later writes in his diary—with a view to a hypercritical, snappy, racy, inside-dope-laden, stimulating, penetrating shot-in-the-arm of a post-war best-seller. The world will hear of James Hungerford Ribb as soon as the war is over: he has all the data: he is the man on the spot; he will be able to tell us, if we win, exactly how we won; or vice versa. Ribb is in on everything. He has met everybody. Great men take him into their confidence. In 1933, he told Hitler what Mussolini had said to him in 1925, and Hitler said to Ribb: "My dear Ribb, you interest me deeply." Ribb mentioned it casually to Stanley Baldwin, after he had returned from a heart-to-heart chat with Josef Stalin with whom he is on the best of terms. The Pope, Charlie Chaplin, James Maxton, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Mackenzie King, Ann Sheridan, Henry Ford, Sam Goldwyn, the Archbishop of Canterbury, George Formby, Professor Joad, General Montgomery and Vic Oliver all smack him on the back and call him "Ribby". He will not put pen to paper for a penny less than eight thousand dollars. Now, he makes a note or two:—

General E. said: "My dear Ribb, I value your advice very highly." But with men like this at the reins is it any wonder that the Germans and Italians are pushing us into the sea? No drive. A neutral personality. Timid. Half-hearted. A desk-man, not a man of action. Compare E. with Rommel, etc. His speech was punk. He talks without opening his mouth, you can't hear what he says. So now as before men go out to die for a brass-hat . . .

Ribb is a little embittered. By virtue of his world-wide renown he got an interview with Eagles, who was not communicative. "Take it from me, General, an army needs publicity the same as anybody else. Take my advice——"

But the General, without letting him finish what he had to say snapped: "I value your advice very highly, but at the moment I'm too busy to listen to it; so good-day."

The "my dear Ribb" is pure fiction, but the General really did say "I value your advice very highly".

And the speech, as Ribb will one day tell the world, is uttered hurriedly, in a barking military monotone. General Eagles, forcing himself to the detested task of public speaking, simply chucks the words at the men who listen.

Those who live . . . and many must die . . . will remember him; a skinny, abbreviated, erect man standing up in a car, his hands locked behind him. As he raises his voice the tendons in his throat spring up and down. He sounds strangely petulant . . . this might be some twopenny-half-penny affair of manœuvres; one feels that he is in a hurry to get back home in time for tea.

He says:—

"Soon we are going to see some fighting. That is what we came here for. Our position is grave. We all know that. It is not going to be easy for us. There is a lot of pain and danger ahead of us. Some might say that what we are about to attempt is impossible. But we are Englishmen and with God's help I believe we'll come through. Now we have got to prove that we are men, who know how to live or die like men according to how God wills it. A great deal depends upon us now. England must not be let down by *us*. Get ready for a rough passage. I can tell you in advance that it is not going to be amusing. But we never did get anywhere without sweat. If there are any

soft men among us they must make themselves hard now or never. We are fighting very desperately for everything we ever held sacred. Our goal lies over there."

He snatches a hand from behind him and flings it forward.

"Let's go to it!"

There is a hoarse cheer. Eagles sits down. Somebody says: "Good old Tomtit, sitting up there as if 'e had a cleaning-rod up 'is backside!"

Engines turn over. Men shake loose the tendons of their legs. Somewhere, somebody begins to sing:—

On kit-inspection I'm not forgotten,
The officer says my socks are rotten,
When did I wash them? I have forgotten . . .
Roll on my Three!

There is not much talk. Men feel that now, at last, Life and Death stand toe-to-toe, and that the odds are in favour of the Black Angel. A Lieutenant-Colonel says to a Major: "What the devil does Tomtit think he's up to? It seems to me that the only reasonable thing to do is, take a much smaller force on this Sidi bu Zibula caper and march the rest south-west to engage von Osten's army."

The Major kills a large and juicy fly, scrapes the corpse off the back of his hand and says: "Whichever way you take it . . . I wouldn't mind laying five to four that we never see Alex again."

"Make it six to two, and I'll take you."

"Pounds?"

"All right, pounds."

The great mass begins to move again.

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These men have fallen into the dust heap of the world which shifts, treacherous and whispering, obedient to the thirty-two winds of Africa. They wander over the desert stroking and beating its grey face into strange shapes. High hills become deep valleys; the valleys fold and hump into hills again, only to fall away into lifeless plains gouged into patterns like watered silk . . . and then these plains run away like sand in an hour-glass; run away to nowhere, but when the wind turns they trickle back into dunes shaped like oyster-shells, like snails, like ears, like mysterious writings, like the whorled prints of titanic thumbs, like shrunken breasts . . . and then everything is smeared out in a breath; the old hills return, sublimely curved, until the tormented air knits them into endless ribbed scarves which it will soon unravel and re-coil over and over and over again. A curse is on this desert. Every grain of the sand of the land God gave to Ishmael is doomed to twist and turn eternally, lifeless yet alive, fidgeting without hope of rest. Birds and beasts avoid it. It is bad land. Only men cross it, of their own will. And insects! Where men go flies follow. The vilest man on earth smells sweet and tastes good to the flies. So they tickle and sting and bite while the driven dust tingles, scratches and suffocates.

Neverthelss, men go.

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Nobody is singing now. Not a breath must be wasted. Energy is precious. Soon, physical strength will be worth more, per ounce, than gold or ambergris. The time is coming when this desert will sand-blast the soft streaks out of the fibres of these good men born and bred in the gentle and temperate shires of England; they are to be

baked and filed, shrunk light and tough like briar pipes in an oven. The flawed wood must crack.

Sergeant Doughty says to Corporal Cherry: "This'll find some of 'em out. This'll show some of 'em how to get their guts out of the moth-balls. This time tomorrow watch out for some of 'em dropping like flies."

Corporal Cherry, gloomy and uncommunicative, heavy and square as a house on a moor, merely grunts. He is of that type of Midlander that takes to wrestling and weight-lifting early in life . . . ponderously obstinate, built to last for ever, thick-walled against foul weather but cramped and dim within—as I said, like a house on a moor. It is impossible either to like or dislike him; Cherry is a man of stone; he will not go out of his way to swat a fly, but a horse would break its head in collision with him. He hardly ever speaks, and when he does he gets bogged in thick, glutinous sentences, and still says nothing in the end.

But the man who marches behind him between Bennett and Madison is of a different kind. It is he whom Doughty had in mind when he spoke to Cherry; Private Lackland, a questionable character. You can see by his face that there is something wrong with him. What? He might pass as good-looking. It is safe to say that women probably like him. Having said this, still looking at Lackland, you ask yourself exactly why women like him, and then you may begin to form conclusions about him. There are three fundamental reasons why women fall in love with men. Best and rarest of all, a woman loves a man as her spiritual equal and proper physical complement—such love may be perfect, and productive of many fine things. But most frequently women love men because they want either to be dominated by men or to dominate them; and out of this comes half the rottenness of the world. Women like Lackland because he needs their help. He is a man home-

sick for the protective darkness of the womb. Since the unlucky hour of his birth he has been trying to crawl back, although he has grown up big and strong with all the superficial characteristics of a proper man. Lackland's self-esteem is infected with a gangrene. There is no filth through which he will not crawl towards a woman's pity. There is no fraud, fake, quackery or lie that Lackland will scorn to use, if only he can preserve a woman's kindly opinion of him. Being a tall man he prefers little women—there is more self-abasement to offer a little woman. Sometimes he beats them a little, in order to get a keener thrill out of his more abject repentance later on; but generally he confines himself to accusation, reproach, quiet nagging, and "You don't care what happens to me". His strongest suit is a shower of tears together with an outburst of tremulous knuckle-biting. One of his ambitions is, to be walked over by a file of small blonde mannequins; God help him! He is a slave conscripted to fight for freedom, a man with a yearning for the mud, whose soul, lashed to a bedrail with a pyjama-cord, hangs wriggling while it rejoices in its degradation.

Yet he looks like a man—but not to Doughty, who has spent his clear-eyed years training men, and who can size men up by virtue of the thousands he has seen and known. You or I might say: "A masochist-sadist is always soft". Doughty says: "I can tell by a man's face if he's got anything in him or not. I can tell by a man's face. Lackland looks big; Lackland talks big; Lackland acts big. But where Lackland's backbone ought to be, d'you know what there is?"

After a rhetorical pause he adds an Anglo-Saxon word of four letters.

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On Lackland's right, steadfastly swinging his big boots, Ben Cream marches. Cream is the Friend of God. Most men speak of God as most women speak of True Love:—"I daresay there must be such a thing, somewhere . . ." But Cream says he has seen God, face-to-face. It happened when he had his teeth out under anæsthetic. Everything stopped and the stars came down and danced: then all the stars rushed together in a refulgent light, which burst open and let out a voice. The voice said a word that was not a word. Cream knows that he came into the Presence while his soul was out of his body. . . and one day he will remember that word, and when he says it a Trumpet will sound . . . Until that day Cream lives a good life. He gives everything away, accepts injustices, never swears, keeps his mind away from women, and quotes the Gospel; never lies, speaks out loud, smiles even when he is alone, and says absurd things. Tell him that you have been swindled out of privilege-leave and he will probably say:—"Better 'n being crucified, Jack". He calls everybody Jack. People look at him anxiously: he keeps his mouth on the verge of opening; only a film of saliva separates his lips, while his eyes blink slowly. Sometimes he raises a hand and opens his mouth as if he has remembered something; but the hand goes down and the mouth shuts again. Cream is trying to remember The Word.

"*We* get 'em, trust *us* to get 'em," says Doughty; and calls upon his Maker to perform an improper impossibility next Wednesday.

But as for getting them, Doughty is right. The War sucks in and mixes up everything that ever came since Gæa sprang from Chaos and gave birth to Heaven and the Sea.

The tenth man down the rank from Cream is a Jew named Katzenelenbogen, who calls himself Ellen—he marches next to a lemon-haired, melon-headed paper-

hanger who once belonged to the British Union of Fascists. In the rear treads Private Falkland Bead, who use to be a schoolteacher and who, at this moment, is thinking of a scheme for vocational testing to be applied to children of ten: he hopes he may live to work it out, but does not commit himself to optimism. On his right plods Rafter, whose heart is sick for the hedges and ditches by the Bedford Road. On his left is Rigby Thack, who has spent eight of his thirty-four years in prison for larceny, and who does not care a damn.

For Thack reasons that whoever wins this war, other people's property will always have a market-value.

Still farther away behind, a Corporal says to Sergeant Edgeworth: "By God Almighty, if they don't give us a break for rest in a minute, I'll drop."

Edgeworth replies: "Stop bobbing. Just wait." He turns his head and shouts: "All right, all right! Keep moving!"

He hears a voice behind him say: "Christ, I could do with a wash!"

Edgeworth shouts: "Wash? Wash, you painted doll? *Wash?* What do you think you're going to do? Jump into bed with the bloody Germans? Wash! What next? Why, you woman! Do you want some scent, do you want some eau-de-cologne to put on your baynit? Somebody take his rifle away and give him a powder-puff!"

Suddenly there comes an order: *Halt!*

They rest. A man says to Sergeant Edgeworth: "Are we nearly there?"

"Nearly," says Edgeworth.

"How much longer, Sergeant?"

"Not much longer now, son; any moment now."

The man, staring at the Sergeant with vague eyes, says: "My old woman had a kid last week, a boy . . ." The

vague eyes fill with tears—an expense of moisture their owner can ill afford. “. . . I hope I get to see him.”

Edgeworth replies: “Did I ever let you down? Well then, take my word for it!”

Aside, the Corporal says to him: “No kidding, how much farther?”

“I’ve got no idea.”

An animated clot of dust cracks open near the top, and out of it the voice of Mr. Mann says: “All right, Sergeant Edgeworth?”

“Everything’s all right, sir. Excuse me, sir; any idea how much farther?”

Mann replies: “Not a great deal. We’ll manage it.” He walks away and hears Edgeworth shouting that everything is all right. Seeing Pryde, Mann says: “How are you?”

“Awful,” says Pryde. “I could drop.”

“Me too, but it would look so bad,” says Mann.

In the front a Major whose face resembles a tomato trampled into the dust says: “We seem to be getting along, Sergeant-Major.”

In the rear, a young Medical Officer says to Probyn-Tweed: “You should see some of the feet they’ve brought me. I should say that it was physically impossible. Raw meat.”

Captain Probyn-Tweed replies: “Physically, everything’s impossible.

“You mean?”

“Oh, nothing, nothing!”

Whistles blow. The upper air is trembling. Enemy aeroplanes are coming over.

SIX

MILES away the Italian General, the bulldog-headed Dino Cura, composes his fierce face and looks calm. His arms are folded; he rocks backwards and forwards on his heels and toes, shuts his eyes, and—being a man of imagination—sees the men who follow General Eagles scattered over the desert like coffee-grounds in a basin, ready to be washed away.

He hears a noise like the vigorous beating of remote carpets; looks up and sees the darkening eastern sky twinkling like the spangled skirts of a dancer in an amber spotlight. His wide mouth grows wider and, as his dense eyebrows lift and draw apart, the folds that run from his nostrils down to his lips deepen and curve out. General Cura is smiling. He sees himself, stern and dark as death, accepting the surrender of General Eagles. He will bow—oh, Cura will not be less than magnanimous! Chivalry costs nothing. It is, in war, what flattery is in love—a gracious extra, a free supplement, a romantic Saturday Page. Furthermore, it is just as well . . . one never knows what the end may be . . . But on the whole Cura feels that his future is assured. He has three formidable allies:—German armed force, the English Temperament, and the Hague Convention.

“With love and kisses!” he says, saluting the sky. Several officers of his Staff laugh: a German Staff Officer smiles for half a second with the top left-hand corner of his mouth.

The twinkling in the sky dies away: one may now assume that British fighters are engaging their enemies in the air. So they are. General Eagles hears the combat as a broken rattle, such as might be made by a boy passing a church-

yard and drawing a stick across the railings, defying his fear of death and darkness.

Nearer to Eagles than he will ever know, a Bren-gunner dancing round a tripod like an old English clown at a may-pole, empties the magazine. His Number Two snaps another magazine home. But in the air something clatters and an aeroplane comes down with a kind of howl. There is a little interval of quiet. The Bren-gunner points to a distant spout of black smoke; and then, as a great flapping explosion comes to his ears, grins and says:—

“That’ll be twenty fags I want from you, Geordie.”

His name is Oddum, and he will never know that General Eagles at this very moment is feeling a great love for him, and actually saying: “Good boy, good boy”. As a matter of fact Oddum is not sure whether he is under the command of General Eagles or General Smith: he doesn’t care. How can he care? He is one man in one platoon of one company out of a single battalion—he is something like one ten-thousandth part of one division in an Army. Oddum is nothing; one acorn on an old oak. And what is an acorn? Only the seed of the tree; nothing but an oak-tree unborn.

He will never know that he has avenged Eddie Blood. He never heard of Eddie Blood. But when the Enemy came diving down behind a mad spray of flying lead, one bullet hit a rifle-bolt and ricocheted whining in the shape of a butcher’s hook; it struck Eddie Blood over the left ear, so that now he knows everything. But not with his brains: they are on Doughty’s helmet. Doughty, who always doubted their existence, will not notice them there—he has felt something like a nettle-sting where the right-hand side of his neck joins his shoulder. Looking down he sees a clean-cut edge of ripped cloth and a smudge of blood where the bullet grazed his flesh. If he had been inclining an inch to his right, Doughty would now be on the way to

Heaven or to Hell: but it is merely a scratch. Doughty says "Ha!" and looks round. The same bullet has taken the heel off Cream's left boot. Lackland lies still. But as Doughty looks he moves, glances upwards. It is right and proper for a man to preserve himself under fire, but it seems to Doughty that whatever Lackland does is somehow wrong, ill-timed, vaguely nasty.

Ellen—trust a Jew to grab more than his share—has two bullets in the chest: he will be dead tomorrow, no doubt.

Most of the rest seem to be surviving—several thousand plain Englishmen of indefinable colour and temperament; short rather than tall, thin rather than fat, passionately devoted to football and accustomed to living on an average thirty-two shillings a week; men who are here because everyone else is here; men who hate nobody much, love nobody much, believe in nothing much—ordinary English wartime soldiers who get their martial spirit as they get their furniture, in greater quantities than they feel they need, for the sake of self-respect. The Desert is a vast suburban street full of watching neighbours . . . fearlessness is an oaken dining-room suite—you can't very well be without it; everybody has it; people would talk. Similarly, recognised heroism is a kind of radiogram, you get it if you can . . . usually by instalments . . . it is a good thing to have, it pleases the wife; you rarely mention it and never boast about it, but the pride of it is always with you . . .

A man from Northampton, a junior book-keeper, picks up a flattened bullet and puts it in his pocket to take home.

The column moves on through the dust.

The flies outnumber the men by ten thousand to one; crowd into nostrils and ears, explore the dim spaces between helmets and foreheads, cluster avidly about open wounds, driving men over the edge of self-control, across the high

wire of hysteria, and down into sick despair. Now, when 'planes pass, nobody takes the trouble to look up. Friends . . . enemies . . . let them come, let them go; only drive away these flies; only lay this dust; only say "Rest," and let a man drop in his tracks and sleep and sleep and sleep! Time has stopped. Life has stopped. The sun has burnt itself out—it glows like a coal under a thickening greyness. This is death; this is hell. Here is Eternity. Every second is a thousand years; every pace is an endless journey up a terrible hill; and every stud in each boot is a doomstone of Sisyphus . . . it ends where it started, and must be rolled on and up hopelessly again and again for ever.

Bennett suddenly shouts: "What for? What for?" He thinks he shouts: he croaks the words . . . "*What for?* Why? What 've *I* done? What? When? Who *to*? Then *Al-bloody-mighty Hell*—what's the *idea*? What——"

"Shut up," says Madison.

"Don't you tell me——"

"Shut it up!"

Bennett articulates a few dusty words: "If you knew *where* you was!"

"Want to know where you are?" growls Doughty.

"Where are we?"

"You're on your bloody way, so keep going!" says Sergeant Doughty, trying to spit. "One more word and I scoff ya!"

Thirty seconds later, Bennett says: "Sorry: I come over queer . . ."

"Get a hold of it!" screams Sergeant Doughty, making something like a Cæsarean Section of the delivery of every word. The dust on his face breaks so that his mouth seems to snap at his ears. "Pick it up! Get a hold of yourselves, you Dagoes! Left! . . . Left! . . . Left! . . . LEEEEEEFT!"

They pick up the step again. Somebody says:—"I

could torture flies. I could kill flies slow. I could burn flies alive. I——” He smacks himself in the face, looks at his hand, and begins to laugh. “Ha . . . ah-haaah . . . Ah-ha-ha-haaaaah-haaaaaah! Missed!”

Lackland picks up the laugh. “Eeee—heh, he-he-he-he! Heeeeeee-he-he-he-he——”

But of all men, Ben Cream strikes him a shocking blow on the cheek with his open hand. Lackland stops laughing suddenly. Cream says:—“Don’t do that, mister; now *don’t* do that, brother!”

“You hit me,” says Lackland, gasping.

“Yahm, I hit you, but not in anger or malice; not in hatred, friend—I hit you because you had to be hit, sir; I hit you like a midwife hits a baby on the back of the bum to remind it it’s got to take and draw God’s breath of life, mister brother. You don’t want no giggles like a woman; not you, boy—you don’t never want to start laughing like that. I’m sorry I hit you, but we can’t let you laugh like *that*. Forgive me . . . You knew not what you was doing.”

Lackland, now, wants to cry. If only he gets through, he thinks, he will write a book—a wonderful book about the War, to be entitled *The Misery of Victory* or, as the case may be, *The Agony of Defeat*—in any case, autobiographical of a man in anguish; for he knows human suffering as no other man knows it. These dogs know nothing of the realities of Life and Love. What can they know of Sacrifice? Yet if he had not gone absent because of a woman’s promise, he might at this moment be safe in a Job. Ah, God, God! Woman, Woman! Martyrdom, thy name is Lackland! Who has gone through more than he, who even finds pleasure in pain . . . so long as it is not this kind of dull, uncomfortable pain?

Madison is saying:—“Flies? Ahh, there’s muck for you, flies!”

A melancholy man from the north says: "'E say flies?"
"Yehm, flies, that's right; flies . . ."

The word crawls back. At a considerable distance from Madison a thick, squat man says—"I'm a nursery-gardener. I grow zanth's."

"Zanth's?"

"Zanthums."

"Ah, *zanthemums*?"

"Un, zanthums . . . Chry-santhemums. I grow big zanth's. Black flies eat 'em. Dirty things, black-flies! Oooogh, *dirty!*"

"Eat what?"

"Zanth's. Chry-*san*-the-mums. But cushy-cow-ladies eat flies . . . see?"

"You gone mad?"

"Me? Why?"

"Who eats flies? What d'you mean, eats flies?"

"Cushy-cow-ladies! Lill red 'uns."

"Lady-Birds, you mean, you farmer's yob!"

"Maybe Lady-Birds: we call 'em Cushy-Cow-Ladies. Nice things—keep black-flies off the chrysanth's. Blood-*me*, what nicer flower is there than a big white zanth?" The nursery-gardener gulps. "Like snow," he says, "white snow . . ."

He lifts his head. His companions, as through several layers of packed wool, hear something making a noise like a thumb running down a violin-string. The nurseryman spins round and falls. His companion sits down on his dead body, says "Owch!" and dies also, shot through the heart. The Enemy is come again. The column heaves like a loose rope: then come signals. The signals say *Forward*. Why not? Bombs and bullets are better than flies and dust. Who cares? The infantrymen push their feet in front of them. It was only a lone raider. Somewhere to the rear a

bomb has hit a truck, which is going up now in a pillar of cloud and of fire.

Meanwhile, something has gone wrong with the middle distance: the air appears bruised and smudged. Something like a bristly hairbrush strikes Mann in the face—flying sand.

“Enter the Grave-Digger,” says Mann. A wind is rising, and throwing the desert at them in shovelfuls.

SEVEN

SERGEANT DOUGHTY bellows like a mad bull, wordless and defiant:—“Maaaaahn!” It means *Come on*. He hears the voice of Ben Cream raised in exhortation:—

“*Whither shall I go from Thy spirit? Or whither shall I flee from Thy presence?* The Lord’s always with you, brother. You got to fight the good fight with all your might, sir; with all thy might. Bear up, mister! The Lord took and delivered Shadrach and Meshach and Abednego from a fiery furnace. Trust God—He knows what He’s doing of; you can’t tell Him what to go and do. Now——”

“You bloody madman,” cried Lackland, in a husky and agonised shout, “Shut your jaw!”

But Ben Cream goes on:—“If I ascend up into Heaven, Thou art there: if I make my bed in Hell, behold Thou art there . . . Yes, mister, if I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea; even there shall Thy hand lead me and Thy right hand shall hold me. You mark my words, friend. Yes . . . the darkness hideth not from Thee; but the night shinest as the day: the darkness and the light are both alike to Thee . . .”

“My feet are bleeding,” says Lackland, half-crying.

“So were His,” says Cream.

The dust is putting out the sun, which burns blood-red now, steadily darkening. A hot fog has come over the Desert. There was a time when the world sped cleanly in a clearly-defined orbit about a bright pure light. Now, it gropes drunkenly around a tumid and feverish inflammation. Seventy seconds after Doughty has shouted, somebody asks: "Don't we rest *now*?" Time will not burn: it is dying . . . a second smoulders like a thick dry string. Half a minute later the same man will say:—"It's the middle of the night by now—don't we *ever* stop?"

A haggard truck-driver who used to be chauffeur to a musical-comedy star sees the sun and says:—"Red . . . Stop. Red means Stop."

"You watch out," says the soldier next to him.

"Nothing to watch."

The road seems to be heaving sluggishly under a thin smoke, like boiling porridge. The soldier says: Where *are* we supposed to be going?"

"Should I know?" asks the driver, wearily, yawning. The loose skin of his face quivers as the truck jolts on, dragging a squirrel-tail of grey dust towards the burnt-up western horizon.

Now, everything that moves appears to flaunt a plume, or trail a fluffy boa, or wear a majestic furry train. The dust is getting softer and rising higher, while the dreary bowl of the desert sings like a rapped wine-glass with the noise of the flies. As an undertone to this wearisome thin droning which lingers perpetually on the verge of fading away, you begin to hear a strange, surging whisper—as if you were holding sea-shells against your ears—*Hhhoaaaahh, Hhhoaaaahh. . . .*

"For God's sake, *not* a sandstorm?" says Pryde, thickly.

An apricot-faced little subaltern named Ivy, with a trace of white-blond moustache which is not unlike a milk-mark

on a baby's lip, says:—"If it is, I rather think we're going to have a d-deuce of a business." He is nineteen years old, and has promised his mother never to swear, play cards for money, drink spirits, or touch strange women. He wants to be a furniture-designer, and—only eighteen months ago—sent five shillings to an advertiser who promised to cure blushing and self-consciousness in three days. He was not cured.

"Lovely," says Pryde, cracking the dust about his nostrils with a sneer.

"Yes, it does rather add interest to things, doesn't it?" asks Mr. Ivy, who at this moment is rejoicing in a new and delightful sense of romantic freedom.

Mann speaks to a Sergeant-Major, a smallpox-pitted veteran with a face like a withered orange. "Sandstorm, do you think, Sar-Major?"

"You never can tell, sir."

"What do you think?"

"I think not, sir."

"No?"

"No, sir: wrong sort of season, sir." Sergeant-Major Heartborne indicates that even if there is a sandstorm he will not acknowledge it, because it has no right to exist just now. He is a man of Law, a Regimental Man. It has been said of Heartborne that he will competently and willingly punch a ticket or a jaw, nail up a Christ or a crate, stone a date or an aduress, hang a man or a picture, go to heaven or to hell, provided a superior officer gives the necessary order. He is regarded with admiration and hate: he is a Terror on and off Parade; he never did anything wrong in his life. Sweating infantrymen have complained, with bitterness, that Heartborne ran them round the Square at the double for ten minutes, loaded with the Fighting Order . . . but in the same breath they have admitted that Heart-

borne doubled round the Square also, running backwards in order to keep his eye on them, and loaded with the same weight of equipment. The N.C.O.s and men of his battalion would not part with him for his weight in Woodbines—he is something to boast about, something to curse and to cherish.

“We couldn’t do with a sandstorm just now, sir,” he says.

“Nor can the Enemy,” says Mann. “It cuts both ways.”

The men march past as Heartborne swings back, straight as a pace-stick and irritatingly spry in spite of the dirt that covers him.

“Narrow-guts,” mutters Bennett. “Old Heartless.”

But a young Lance-Corporal named Arne, who normally works as a clerk in a shipping-office, looks at Heartborne and feels within him a glow of love. Arne, a virginal Baptist of twenty-one, has found his ideal. He has decided never to go back to civilian life; to stay for ever in this wonderful world of marching men—this best of all possible worlds in which everything is for the best—this clean-cut, simple, honest, manly world . . .

And Lackland is working things out. *Why do men go on?* he wonders. Because they are cowards: they are afraid of appearing weak. He is not a coward: he is going to fall down soon, and let people think what they like. But what if they leave him to lie there, all alone? This is too horrible to contemplate. So he marches with the rest: he feels that he is acting like a hero . . . but the thought brings him no comfort. It is all Patricia’s fault, and when he gets home he will not fail to remind her of it.

Halt. The masses of men are still.

Rest! They let their legs relax, and the desert feels like a goosefeather bed.

“Gissa fag,” says Bennett to Madison.

"That's six you owe me," mutters Madison, reluctantly picking a cigarette out of a battered case and handing it over.

Doughty barks: "Go easy on that water! There's no reservoirs and soda-fountains where *you're* going to, you know!"

Dusty Smith spits out a fly and says:—"When all this is over I'm going to have about fifteen cups o' tea."

Hundreds of others ask: "Where are we?" But nobody answers except with a grunt or a shrug. You cannot see fifty yards ahead of you, now. Everybody stays as near to his neighbour as male pride permits. There is scarcely a man in the Division who has not, at the back of his mind, a little squirming dread—that he is lost. Now, for the first time, stolid and duty-driven volunteers begin to be aware of a real dislike for the Enemy that is giving them so much aggravation.

Dust-husky shouts sound from point to point along the columns. "Come on, get up," says Doughty. "Get up, come on!"

"Oh please, Lord, help me up!" cries Ben Cream as, with a terrible effort, he rises to his feet.

Corporal Cherry, wordless and grim, grips Lackland by one arm and raises him from the sand where he has been sprawling like a dead man. "I can't," says Lackland.

"You better," says Cherry.

They form up.

"By just about now my wife ought to 've dropped the kid," says Roast.

They march on. Pryde realises, suddenly, that for several hours he has not been obsessed by fear; that he is too tired to care. Can it be that Fear, dogging a man's footsteps, needs time to rest and refresh itself, and may therefore be left behind if the road is long and rough enough?

From a distance he hears a rumble of explosion; yet his heart does not leap into his mouth.

Little Mr. Ivy is astonished to see Pryde smiling.

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As this army of suicidal maniacs flounders through the perfidious desert which the rising wind is spinning out in endless fluted coils like piping on a cake in a bad dream, a quarrel begins. Two men marching side by side have words. One of them comes from a hamlet called Windyclays; the other was born in the village of Lambsland, three or four miles distant.

He says: "Stop grousing, you: you're not back at Windyclays now. Shut up!"

"What's the matter with Windyclays? Bloody sight better 'n Lambsland, any day."

"Don't make me laugh. Windyclays! Three pubs and a pigsty. Geh!"

"What about Lambsland? Three pigs and a pub!"

"The pigs at Lambsland 're better men than the men at Windyclays!"

"Your girls ought to know!"

"You say that again!"

"You heard me the first time. Lambsland! Get out! The worst middleweight in the world came from Lambsland."

"You're a dirty liar."

"I'm a dirty liar? Am I? What about Jack Dainty?"

"Dainty could eat you and any five others from Windyclay before breakfast!"

"I'd like to see it: Lambsland for Liars!"

"Windyclays! Windy by name and Windy by nature!"

"So *you* say."

"So I can bloodywell prove!"

"Any time you bloodywell like, you Lambsland stinking bragger!"

"Right, Windy!"

"I'll knock you senseless, by Christ I will!"

"You're senseless already, Windy-Windyclays; but I'll bash you to——"

"—The first thing, first minute I get the chance, you Lamby Liar!"

"Right."

"Right."

The two men exchange looks of implacable loathing, and march on together. They both feel keener, lighter, altogether happier now: they have a feud; there is something to look forward to. But first they must finish the job in hand. Having got this War off their hands they can settle down to the really vital affair of Windyclays *versus* Lambsland.

The man from Lambsland starts to hum *Down Mexico Way*. To spite him, Windyclays whistles *In the Quarter-master's Store*.

The left-hand man pitches sideways in a dead faint.

The sea-shell whisper of the desert is changing, rising to meet the fine-drawn wavering whine of the insects.

General Eagles, chewing the mouthpiece of an empty pipe, finds himself in a theoretically-fascinating predicament.

He cannot advance: that would be crazy. He cannot stay where he is: that would be hopeless. He cannot withdraw: that would be useless. He cannot do anything, but he cannot do nothing. He remembers idle talk he has heard, awe-inspired murmurings of Hitler's lucky winds. In one of the secret sealed cells in the unfrequented back-alleys of his mind, something begins to twitch uneasily. As if everything else was not enough, now there must come, unpre-

dictable and deadly, this uprising of the air, this revolt of the dust! Is this God's will? Has Hitler corrupted the very elements?

General Eagles looks from grave face to grave face; The gentlemen of the Staff are silent. They watch Eagles, who sits perfectly still. He grasps the stem of his pipe in his left hand and looks down while, slowly and carefully, the fingers of his right hand twist the bowl round and round. He seems to be driving home an invisible screw. One Staff Officer, a gaunt Brigadier, is reminded of a coffin-maker screwing down the lid . . . there is the same finality in Eagles' gesture.

Then the General raises his fist on high as if he is about to beat it against the table: but he brings it down slowly and carefully and places it on his knee. He says: "Sidi-bu-Zibula. There is nothing else for it."

The Brigadier exchanges glances with another Brigadier. An Order goes out.

The Officer commanding Mann's Company, in due course, looks at a bit of paper and, sticking out his malacca-coloured moustache, says: "We go ahead, God willing or otherwise. And quite right too!"

"But," says a Major, "what if this wind gets stronger?"

The other man replies: "What the devil difference does it make, in that case, if we go backwards or forwards?"

The paper-chase of dispatches is over for the moment. The Order is freely translated by junior officers, according to their temperaments. It says, in effect, that everybody has got to advance, sand or no sand, wind or no wind, water or no water, hope or no hope; and if they don't like it they can lump it . . . so they'd better make up their minds to like it.

It is all very well to issue Orders; Canute issued Orders, also.

In the meantime the wind is rising inexorably.

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So now they taste the real deathliness of the dust, feel the real sting of the angry sand, and, advancing in a dizzy and gathering gloom, know something of the meaning of blindness. The Desert is throwing in its reserves. Thirst attacks our advancing men: it lays its thick, feverish, hairy hand on their tongues. A Fifth Column under the command of Delirium goes, insidiously, for their heads; while the sands' equivalent of Italy, the ever-retreating, flies harass them more resolutely as they grow weaker. The driven sand and dust gags their throats. It gets behind the stocking-hats and handkerchiefs with which they try to veil their mouths. It gets underneath their helmets, so that every man might be wearing a crown of thorns. They reel on, stumbling, drugged with wretchedness. Now, in this strange darkness, every man feels lost and alone. Nobody knows where he is going. Some man of genius originates an idea: everybody, while trying to keep in step, must hold on to the rifle-butt, or the webbing, of the man in front of him. Being blind, every man must trust the man who is leading him. Somewhere to the front . . . somewhere in the gritty darkness ahead . . . there is Somebody who knows the way. And this cannot last for ever.

Very slowly, with dreadful labour, the columns strive ahead.

Mann, in his agony, still thinks of the two ways of looking at this.

It may be said (he thinks) that every man clings to the man in front of him so that a thousand men holding on to each other become like one man who, obedient to orders which he cannot understand, marches into an empty darkness full of pain and danger and thirst and hunger

and wind and dust . . . So he goes on, because he has a vision, a hope, a faith in a glory that will come beyond the darkness at the other end of things. Thus, all mankind is an Army, blindly marching in a hopeless desert towards an unseen Peace . . .

It may be said that one man alone is nothing.

Of all these noble thousands, how many, left alone, would continue to struggle? Perhaps one man in five hundred. Here (thinks Mann) we see the real function of the great soul in the march of humanity towards the light. The strength of a strong man, the courage of a brave man, shames a hundred weaklings and cowards into noble emulation. So it may be that the power of any ten thousand is dependent upon the greatness of a certain constant twenty. We are a Nation, an indomitable entity (Mann decides), because we have an instinct for what is right and proper . . . an instinct which, felt as shame, becomes a fierce driving force . . .

And so Mann says to Hazlitt: "Whatever happens, I bet we get through!"

Hazlitt replies: "*You* bet? Damn it all, I've got thirty thousand pounds a year for life on this!"

About fifty yards away from him a man falls dead. There was something wrong with his heart, but he managed to fool the Medical Officers and so achieved the triumph of getting out into the desert where all good men go. If you could wash his face you would see a joyous smile upon it. But you will never see that smile—which, all the same, is his for all eternity.

You cannot wash his face. There is no water to spare.

EIGHT

No water to spare—nothing to spare; not a bullet, not a bean, not a button. Now this grim truth is appreciated as something beyond discussion, and men know that they are caught up in an affair of life or death. They know it now: they are fighting for their lives. They may not fall back—there is nothing to fall back on. Men who have lived soft lives feel a misery akin to the misery of babies being weaned: an essential Something has passed from the earth. Others recall grim evenings when the last six or seven shillings of a desperate little teapotful of hoarded money went to pay a week's rent . . . or when they contemplated in the light of a January dawn one last dusty scuttleful of coals. . . .

An advancing Army, like a growing baby, takes its food and drink as a matter of course; at certain times it opens an anxiously-sucking yet confident mouth. When it sucks in vain it feels, for the first time, that something has gone wrong in the order of things.

Then, a few men collapse out of sheer despair: *they* would have collapsed in any case. Others, who are not unfamiliar with this kind of circumstance, tighten their belts and make ready to race against the Black Horse. The rest summon up their pride, and simply march on: this is the way of the average British soldier. This, in effect, is what he is fighting for—for himself and his belief in himself as a game boy putting up a good show. He wouldn't acknowledge a racing whippet, a fighting pit-terrier, or an illicit gamecock that accepted defeat. So he must go on to the end for his own sake . . . for if he lives, he must live with his own people; and he cannot live with his own people if there hangs about him a stink of cowardice and the air

of a slinking man. It wouldn't be worth his while to live like that.

So his spirit kicks his body in the backside, and says:—"Giddap! Dost'ee favour a Cur?"

Thus the columns of General Eagles shove onwards, hard and fast.

But the Quartermasters are in their own strange hell. Was it Rommel who said that a desert war was hell for the Quartermaster?

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Here, you see, are thousands of men rushing forward at top speed. Every man has hundreds of urgent needs, and every last need has to be supplied.

But exactly how? One says nothing of tanks, ravenous for their thousands and thousands of gallons of oil and petrol, and their truck-loads of spare parts. One says nothing of trucks, desperate for their petrol and oil and spare parts . . . nor of the men inside the tanks and trucks . . . to say nothing of the men that supply the trucks and tanks.

Here is the womb of the barren woman, as mentioned in the Scriptures. Who can fill it? What can there be to justify the perpetual thrust and withdrawal of Man in the desert? Where does such a work begin, and where can it end? If this were only a war of men . . .

Even then, there would be a new anxiety with every footprint. Many anxieties! Quartermasters' anxieties—cares about food to eat, fuel to cook it with, kitchens to cook it in, tins to eat it from . . . let alone water to drink!

"Christ almighty!" cries Beads, Captain and Quartermaster, risen from the Ranks. "From the cookpot to the latrine, the guts of the whole world drop into my lap!"

Captain and Quartermaster Beads gropes for words, and is stuck. Like the boy who fumbled in a jar of nuts, he cannot withdraw his handful.

He thinks of equipment—web, serge, canvas, boots—laces for the eyelets of boots, studs for the soles of boots; hammers to knock the studs in and pincers to wrench the studs out . . . iron feet for the use of anybody who mends boots—wooden stands for the iron feet; handles for the hammers. . . .

And socks for the feet to fit the boots . . . and wool to darn the socks, and needles for the wool, and thimbles for the needles, and housewives for the needles and thimbles and wool. And thinking of wool—thread for the buttons, buttons for the thread—shirt-buttons, fly-buttons and the pants to which you sew them. And the blouses worn above the pants. And the shirts (drab) worn beneath the blouses . . . the vests worn under the shirts . . . the under-pants worn below the vests . . .

He is wretchedly weary. He says:—"Rifles to kill the Jerries with . . . shovels to bury the bastards with . . . it's a wonder I don't have to have gravestones to put over 'em, and lilies. Or brandy in case they faint!"

. . . Rum, tea, armbands for the Police; if and when one needs Police. . . Ground-sheets, anti-gas capes, helmets, straps, buckles, knives and forks and spoons . . . Water-bottles, corks for water-bottles, metal tops and screws and strings for the tops of the corks of water-bottles . . . nuts to screw on the screw-eye things that hold the strings that attach the corks to the water-bottles. Covers for water-bottles. Covers for mess-tins. Covers for the covers of covers . . .

Very light pistols. Anti-tank ammunition.

"Ammo! .303 alone has broken my heart," says the Captain and Quartermaster to himself. "Ammo has short-

ened my life ten years! Ammo . . ." He thinks of .303, of Tracer, of Ballistite . . . even of .303 blank ammunition to frighten people with if they start a riot; of Tommy Guns, Bren Guns, Sten Guns, Lewis Guns, Grease Guns . . . and magazines for same.

He is almost asleep: his stomach turns over, and he half-dreams of a rising and falling mortar-bomb.

"Two-inch, three-inch," he mutters; then starts anxiously awake. Paint: what of paint?

"Blankets," he says; but finds himself thinking of oil-skin wallets, of camouflage-nets and covers for helmets; of Regulation Flannelette otherwise known as "four-by-two"; of pull-throughs, oil-bottles, pencils, hand-grenades, stocking-hats, Army Forms; of A.B.64 Part One and Part Two; of First Field Dressings . . . respirators . . . eye-shields . . . Anti-Dim, and Anti-Gas Ointment . . . cotton waste, carbon paper, bayonets, ink-powder, salt, pepper, bully-beef, tinned stuff which creates a thirst. . . .

Thirst. . . .

Beads bows his head. "Water," he says, "Water, for Christ's sake, water!"

"But he's just had a drink," an orderly begins to say.

The young Medical Officer who has been probing a wound in the Quartermaster's soft side says: "Hold your tongue."

"Water. They're entitled to water. They're entitled to their rations . . ." Beads cries out in anguish. He is not asking for water for himself. He is asking for water as, in the past, he has asked for ammunition, shovels, entrenching-tools, brass buttons, Army Forms, chin-straps . . . *he* didn't want the stuff; *he* never had much use for it; only it was his duty to hand it over to men who had a right to draw it. In his time Captain Beads has cried out in similarly agonised tones for typewriters, table-tops, hand-

scrubbers, boot brushes, lubricating oil, little brass weights for pull-throughs, panes of window-glass, drawing pins, gym shorts, slippers, door knobs, fireworks, electric light bulbs . . . cups and saucers . . . blackout blinds . . . haver-sack-rations, and revolver ammunition, and cleaning rods for light machine-guns, and mattresses, and pillow slips . . . and envelopes, shaving brushes, stove polish, fire-buckets . . .

"Fire-buckets!" he sighs; and his eyes close.

Later on there will be a funny story about how Beads, the Quartermaster, died asking for a fire-bucket; it will be said that he guessed where he was going.

The Medical Officer, a sombre Edinburgh man, gets ready to deal with the next case. The odds were thousands to one against the chance of Beads dying as he has died. The enemy could not possibly have known what they were doing when they let fall the stick of bombs that has made such a mess of the hurrying line of trucks and of the road over which they were meant to travel. The Medical Officer pulls a long face: he is one of those strange men that can read Darwin and the Book of Genesis and find them easily reconcilable. His two favourite authors are Lancelot Hogben and St. John the Divine. He can dispense the most fantastic mixtures of mathematics and theology, biology and calvinism—and swallows them himself without batting an eyelid. In good time, when he has a little leisure in which to think things over, this strange freak of chance will take him into a labyrinth of speculation . . . Was not the House of Job smitten by a Wind? Did not the Adversary—with God's permission—try to break the patience of that sorely afflicted man? Thus, considering an area of one hundred thousand square miles (he will take pencil and paper) and assuming the danger zone of a bomb blast to be X square yards . . .

He deftly removes a long splinter of steel from the shoulder of a wounded driver, and finds himself much too busy at present to toy with the problems of divine Providence.

The wind, meanwhile, is falling. Nevertheless, the unhappy wretches marching ahead are in bitter need of water. They are drying up. They must have water or die. It is Lackland, of course, who says what many men think but are ashamed to say:—"Nobody cares if we die here!"

True; nobody cares a great deal if he and a thousand others die there. Nevertheless, another group of men is working with controlled frenzy, at the wreckage on the road. They, committed to a duty, are ready to work until they drop in their tracks; it is not their business to care who lives or dies—it is their business to clear the road and get the supplies through.

A little short-legged officer of Pioneers who resembles, and talks like a foreman-navvy—which, indeed, he used to be—forgets the pips on his shoulders and, letting out a knotted string of strange oaths, plunges into the wreckage. At this point—there is no doubt that the devil is taking care of the enemy—the trucks have to pass through a narrow defile between two high and naked hills. The explosions have brought down an avalanche of rock and sand. By way of a make-weight, somewhere among the rubble there lies an unexploded bomb which may, or may not go off at any moment: in ten seconds, or ten hours, or ten days from now.

A gang of Engineers start to dig it out. In one of the lulls that come, so mysteriously, at intervals on battlefields, a Sergeant of Engineers is heard saying:—

"The way I look at it, it don't make a haporth of difference whether it's a thousand pounder or a hand grenade

—if it goes off in your hand it don't make no difference at all."

Another Engineer replies: "Ah, but a Mills bomb do leave something they can recognise you by."

The Sergeant snaps: "The less there is to recognise *you* by, the better, you monkey-faced idol, so get a move on."

Another man says: "Here she is."

As he says it, the bomb explodes. He, the Sergeant, the monkey-faced man, and another, suddenly disappear from the face of the earth in a spout of dust and smoke that shoots up, spreads out like an opening umbrella, and comes pattering down. Five hundred yards away a mechanic wrenching at the engine of a truck is stunned for fifteen minutes by a heavy boot which comes out of the sky and falls on the back of his neck. This boot is all that remains of the Sergeant of Engineers. The odd thing about it is, that it is still neatly laced and contains a sock, untorn; but no foot.

A Service Corps Officer, biting his lip, wonders whether it may not be quicker to go back and make a detour. But this would be very dangerous. The Pioneers tell him that they are doing their best. He sees them struggling like ants on a heap of brown sugar. It's ridiculous; it's crazy; it's hopeless. What are they trying to do? Carry the desert away grain by grain? He looks at his watch. The hour-hand seems to be rushing round and round like the indicator of a trick fortune-telling-machine in a fun fair. Time is scurrying away; the day is clicking down out of sight with the mad speed of a plunging anchor-chain . . . and, in the eyes of the Service Corps Officer, every man in the world is moving as slowly as a tree grows. He sends a message back; he must take a desperate chance—some of the trucks must make the detour.

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The infantrymen also look anxiously at their watches and curse the tricks of Time, which has come to life again and is on the run. For they have been halted and ordered to rest. They have dropped in their tracks—limp and lifeless, chewed up and spent, spat out and dried up, enervated, finished. The dust is soft and delightful to lie upon: they could recline there in sweet peace for a hundred years. Nothing but rest matters or is good . . .

But the Lieutenant-Colonel, having sat down with a strange exclamation compounded of a grunt and a groan, a sigh and a growl, smooths his malacca-coloured moustache and stiffly gets up again. With murderous impatience he asks five or six angry questions relative to the possibility of a drink of tea for the exhausted men. He snaps like a turtle: his dry moustache bristles dangerously. *Can* it be done . . . Eh? Eh? Bloody hell and damnation, then!—*Let* it be damnwell done this confounded instant!"

He pours a few drops of water into his mouth and swallows them slowly and ecstatically; lets his bony body relax for a second or two, and says:—"Sar-Major!"

Heartborne is there, so stiff and spry that the Lieutenant-Colonel hates the sight of him.

"Well? Well? Well?"

"All in order, Sir."

"How 're the men, eh? Eh?"

"Well as can be expected, Sir."

"So I should think. When I was their age . . . Come with me."

Heartborne follows him. A man must keep on the move, keep his eyes open . . . show himself, at least, so that the men can see for themselves that he isn't drinking champagne and eating oysters and damnwell fumbling at confounded dancing-girls in the Officers' Mess or somewhere. He stops to tug at a man's webbing and bark: "Too loose,

too loose! Tighten it, tighten it! Flopping about all over the place! Hey, Sergeant, see that this man's belt is tightened!"

Then he pauses where a sprawling group of dirty soldiers appears to be fraternising with an officer whose voice he recognises as that of Mr. Hazlitt—a deliberately reckless voice, affected in accent, but coarse in utterance.

Hazlitt is drawling:—"What a scruffy-looking lot of sods you are, aren't you?"

This gets a laugh. A man who is unrecognisable under incrustations of dust replies:—"You ain't zactly fit to kiss the ladies yourself, sir." There is more laughter.

"Now then!" says Sergeant Edgeworth, with menace.

But Hazlitt says:—"All they think of is women, women, women. You dusty-bellied bunch of womanisers! Now come on, eat your nice little iron-rations—all up! Any complaints? Because if so, you know what you can do with them, don't you? What's the matter with you, Fat-bum?"

A plump, broad-faced soldier says: "Oi ain't herngrÿ, sir."

"Get out of it! Eat up! You big baby!"

The plump man eats. Another man asks: "Will it be Wops or Jerries, sir?"

"Why, what the hell do you care?" asks Hazlitt. "I hope it's Jerries, myself."

"Why, sir?"

"They might stand still and let us get at 'em: I don't fancy a cross-country chase after sprinting Eyeties, not after this little exercise."

"But how much farther is there to go, sir?"

"My God, you're worse than a crocodile of snivelling schoolgirls in long plaits. Please teacher how much farther is there to go! Please teacher are we nearly there? Please

teacher can I do wee-wee! What a lot of pink-eyed jelly-babies you are! Eh, Sergeant? Just like a lot of pregnant white mice. Eh, Corporal? Has anybody got a cigarette?"

A dozen cases fly open. Hazlitt takes a Woodbine from the plump man who didn't want to eat. "Thanks very much, Fatbum," he says.

The plump man grins. He is delighted. The news of Hazlitt's succession to the title has got around. If he survives this campaign long enough to write home, he will have only one thing to say: a real Lord, The Lord Hazlitt, took one of his Woodbines and smoked it on the spot.

Against little things like this the International falls to dust.

Not displeased, the Lieutenant-Colonel moves on: but the R.S.M. purses a disapproving mouth.

Among soldiers, news travels telepathically. Everybody knows, now, that tea is on the way. Men who have been crouching listlessly, not caring whether they are dead or alive, sit up and revive. Meanwhile, Platoon Sergeants and Corporals take stock of their men. "Madison and Bennett," says Doughty. "Where the hell is Madison and Bennett? Who's seen Madison and Bennett?"

Nobody has seen Madison and Bennett. They are mislaid. They have slipped out of the column like a handkerchief from a sleeve. Someone offers the conjecture that they have deserted. Doughty tells him not to be a bloody imbecile: they wouldn't do a thing like that, he says, especially when there was nowhere for them to go.

Mann says: "They must have got lost when we were in the middle of that little sand-storm."

"They were right behind me," says Doughty. "They must have gone straight on when we wheeled: it's possible, sir."

"Probable, I'm afraid," says Mann.

"They were a useful couple of men," says Doughty.

The Company Sergeant-Major taps his teeth with a thumbnail: he is wondering what their legal position is. Here is a problem: are they deserters or casualties? He says:—"Well . . . either they find their way back without delay, or they'll be dead by about this time tomorrow. So that's that. God! I could do with that tea!"

"Madison was the best man in this platoon," says Corporal Cherry.

"Best couple o' men in the Company," mutters Doughty. "I wish to Christ they'd hurry up that tea."

The air is growing clearer, but lingering currents still play strange games with the suspended dust. The unappeased soul of Van Gogh might be writhing here between heaven and earth . . . twisting shadows into the shapes of dark and tortuous cypresses: worrying the powdery sand until it squirms up in clouds like struggling shrubs; catching the descending dust and twirling it into streaky torn curls and half-invisible broken rings and pothooks, before permitting it to go back where it belongs.

As Doughty speaks, the distance begins to rumble. The noise is not unlike that which may be heard in a classroom when a lesson comes to an end—a slapping of closed books, a slamming of desk-lids, a babble of pent-up talk, and a drumming of feet on a hollow-sounding bare floor.

"Guns," says Corporal Cherry.

"Planes," says Sergeant Doughty.

Everybody has heard. Mess tins of tea are gulped in mad haste. There is a prevailing panic fear that some new order will come before there is time to finish drinking; and that would be too much to bear. Lackland, who has been turning over in his mind a plan of escape, decides to finish his tea before he deliberates further. But he is too late. Just as he has put away his tin, a whistle blows.

Silently, the men fall in. They are still terribly weary, but resigned. They have had some tea. Two other men fill up the space left by Bennett and Madison. The word of command comes. Sore left feet heave themselves up and forward. The columns are marching again.

Townskip says to Roast: "Bennett and Madison, they got sense. They're smart. They're fly."

Roast replies: "The more you talk the less you say. What do you mean, fly? The poor fellers 'll be just about dead and buried by now—dead of thirst and buried in sand."

Ben Cream, always exalted, says to Lackland: "The Lord will take care of Bennett, brother, and of Madison too! I know! I know!"

"You? What do you know about anything?"

"I know because I know, friend. I know because I have seen. I tell you, it's just like a flash of light . . . a sort of *bop!*—and then this here light which is too bright to look upon bursts asunder, and then a voice tells you everything—absolutely everything—and it's so wonderful that you shout for joy and laugh like a little child!"

The evening is coming. There are men who hope that they will be permitted to sleep all night. But General Eagles has just decided that if they push on through the night, they ought to reach Sidi-bu-Zibula by dawn.

A Brigadier Linstock-Ash says to his old friend Colonel Paddock: "Seriously, do you think Eagles has gone mad?"

Paddock replies: "Yes, in a way I do. Mad in the same way as Gideon. But then, aren't we all a little mad? Wouldn't we have capitulated weeks ago if we weren't practically certifiable?"

The Brigadier nods. "True, we must have a screw loose somewhere," he says.

They both listen. Fighter-bombers are passing overhead. The distance is popping and grumbling like a disordered stomach.

"The pot is beginning to boil," says the Colonel.

NINE

BENNETT and Madison also hear the planes pass, but they feel that they are lost for ever. The desert is about them and the night is coming.

Madison says: "I reckon we'd better keep going due West."

"West?" says Bennett. "West? This stinking country ain't got no West." He is not joking; he has begun to despair.

But Madison insists: "Where the sun sets, that's where the West is. Come on."

"What for? There ain't nothing there, and even if there is, we will never get to it. This is your bloody fault. You were the left-hand man. You . . ."

Madison says, stolidly: "Stay here if you want to, but I'm going on."

"All right, have it your way. It's no good either way. But have it your way."

Madison asks: "How much is there left in your bottle?"

Bennett replies shamefacedly: "It's empty."

"Did't they tell you not to empty your bottle?"

"How the hell was I to know this was going to happen?" says Bennett.

"You bloody fool!"

Madison shakes his own water-bottle, which is two-thirds empty, and says: "There is not enough here for two."

Bennett grips him by the arm, and cries, in a trembling

voice: "Maddy! Didn't I always share what I had with you? Didn't I?"

"Well?"

"Well . . . you wouldn't not give me a drink of your water?"

"I didn't say I wouldn't give you a drink of my water; I only said there wasn't enough for two."

"You're a pal, Maddy, you're . . ."

"You're a bloody idiot."

"Maddy, you're the best pal I ever had. You're the best fellow in the world. You're the greatest pal a bloke ever had."

They go on towards the sinking sun. Madison slouches ahead at a steady pace. Bennett forces himself to keep close behind him. Soon, he says: "Maddy?"

"Ah?"

"To keep our strength up, if you get what I mean, didn't we ought to take just a sip . . ."

Madison looks at him and unbuckles his water-bottle. Bennett's hand flies forward to take it but Madison catches him by the wrist in a hard, dry grip, and says:

"One small mouthful, mind you!"

Then he gives the bottle to Bennett, who fills his mouth and hands the bottle back. Then Madison drinks while, in spite of himself, Bennett stares at the tilting water-bottle.

Bennett, taking advantage of his moistened mouth, lets out a little gush of useless talk:—

"When you come to think you used to wash in this stuff, and didn't like it when it rained! Blimey, I could do with a bath! I could drink a whole bathful of water; I wouldn't even care if it were soapy water! Or a lemon! Christ, a lemon! I could——"

High up in the air something is screaming; it sounds, for an instant, like the cry of a baby in pain.

"Plane coming down," says Madison. He stands on tip-toe, watching the sky. The scream changes to a trumpet note. They can see the aeroplane falling. Bennett, with the imbecile optimism of his kind, says:—"Perhaps it's one of ours. Perhaps it's only a bit damaged. Perhaps . . ."

"Come on," says Madison, sternly, patting his water-bottle into a comfortable position on his hip.

"You're the best pal I ever had, Maddy," says Bennett following him.

The falling aeroplane howls, louder and louder. In two or three seconds it will strike.

The pilot of the falling plane is still alive. Although he has been wounded in the head, he is not completely stunned; he is gently rocking in a strange, dim, drowsy half-trance between semi-consciousness and oblivion. He feels himself falling but he knows that he is not really falling—dreaming, only dreaming, dreaming of falling. This has happened before when he was a child. It's all nothing; this is not danger, not death—only a silly dream from which, in half a second he will awaken with a bump . . . and then, drawing a deep breath, he will tell himself how good it is to be alive and safe . . . and so sleep again.

Then the dream ends.

Bennett and Madison hear the crash.

"Where was that?" asks Bennett.

"Somewhere near."

Bennett sits down. Madison looks at him from under scowling brows. "Smatter?"

"I'm whacked."

"Giddap!"

"In a minute. Lemme rest a minute, Maddy!"

"Giddap, Bennett!"

"One second, Maddy . . ."

Madison pauses: he is angry. He says:—"God's truth! Just because I can't put you in the report! Just because I can't order you about! So you lay down. Then lay there!" And he walks on stubbornly.

"Maddy! Hold on a tick—I'm coming!"

Madison walks, without turning his head. Bennett rises, tries to run, stumbles and falls; cries out incoherently and gets up again. "Maddy! Maddy!" he shouts. But Madison refuses to hear. In ten heartbreaking minutes of desperate flurrying over the soft sand, Bennett catches up with him, and sobs: "Smatter, Maddy? Ol' man; Maddy—what is it? You wouldn't——"

"All right," says Madison. "Only next time you flop, you can stay. You little stinker—I got a wife 'n kids! What? Am I sticking here because you bloody flop out?"

"Ain't I got a family too?"

"Then walk for it!"

"I am, Maddy!"

"Well, keep on walking then."

"I was. I only wanted a sit-down for a minute."

"No time for that."

"I'm not arguing with you, Maddy, am I?"

Half an hour later Bennett asks: "Where we going?"

"West," says Madison.

"You can walk round the bloody world going West, Maddy."

"You can sit down on your arse and die there if you don't like it."

Night had fallen, with a vague and ghastly low-burning moonlight. The two men have come to a great wedge-shaped dip in the desert. The wind has cut a notch there. They slide down. But when they look up at the slope they have to climb, Bennett realises that his strength is at an

end and that he cannot go any farther. He is convinced, now, that he is a dead man; and a great calm comes upon him.

He says to Madison:—"Okay, Maddy. I'm sorry to say I'm finished. You go ahead."

"You'll die of thirst," says Madison, hoarsely.

"Whatever I die of, my legs is finished."

"I can't carry you, Bennett!"

"I know you can't. You go on, and if you come across anybody, send back for me."

"Bennett don't waste my time; you're a dead man if you lay about there."

Very calmly, now, almost dreamily, Bennett says: "I know I'm a dead man."

"Okay," says Madison, and releases the safety-catch of his rifle. He brings up the butt, shuts his left eye, and takes careful aim at the centre of Bennett's forehead. "I'm not going to let you die of thirst," he says.

Bennett blinks. "Hey! Maddy!"

"You're not a praying man, are you?"

"What do you think you're doing?"

"Doing you a good turn."

"Hey, Maddy! Wait a minute!"

"You die if you lay here anyway. I'm doing you a favour."

"Pointing guns at people!"

"Are you ready?"

Bennett sees something implacable in Madison's face. With a sob, he struggles to his feet and starts to climb the slope.

As they go, Madison also feels that this is the end of everything. If this were an empty plain it is possible—just possible—that Madison might give up hope. But there is a hill in front of him; and while there is a hill to

hide the distance a man will struggle to see what lies beyond. For this reason, I believe, God made mountains.

The water is finished. They must die soon. For every foot they cover, they fall back six inches. At last, burning up the last pinch of his conscious strength, Madison reaches the top of the slope. Bennett is not far behind him. Madison looks down, dreading that he may see a blank space. The space below him is not quite blank. In the middle of it lies a wrecked aeroplane, looking like a dried-up dead fish in the moonlight. Madison says: "There might be something to drink in that." He thinks he says it. In point of fact he says nothing: his throat is too dry for speech. He beckons to Bennett but Bennett is unconscious. Madison kicks him on the shoulder; he stirs. Nothing is left in Bennett; only an instinct to keep crawling. He follows Madison over the top of the slope, and so they both roll down. Now they are only three or four hundred yards away from the fallen plane—the machine in which the young man thought he dreamed that he was falling and was never to know that it was not a dream.

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It is not badly damaged: if the pilot had been alive when it crashed he might have walked, or at least staggered away. But he is dead with an expression of blank amazement on his face, and between his feet there lies a fresh lemon. This is no irony of fate: there is no such thing as irony of fate. Irony belongs to Man; it is something on account of Resignation. Fate says what it means: the Norms crack no jokes.

Of all things, a lemon! Madison picks it up, and then drags the pilot out: he finds a few odd pounds of secreted strength to help him. But he has picked up too many hares and partridges not to know the feel of dead meat. He lets the boy fall, and searches for the water-bottle; finds it,

together with two more lemons, half a bar of chocolate, and some white tablets which he throws away. The bottle is full. Madison gulps down two mouthfuls . . . wrestles with himself, falls, and swallows a third. Then he takes the bottle to Bennett.

Bennett drinks and revives. Madison gives him a lemon. "Poor sod, poor sod!" says Bennett, chewing lemon-peel in agonised delight. "A kid, too, Maddy—a poor kid . . ." The pilot, in death, looks absurdly young. "Has he got any fags, Maddy?"

Madison has found a case.

"That's gold," says Bennett. But Madison takes out the cigarettes and puts the case back.

"Jerry 'll get that, Maddy."

"Let Jerry get it. I don't rob the dead."

"The fags 're more important, anyway. Aren't they? Eh?"

"Oh, stop it; shut it up!"

"But——"

"Easy on that lemon: make it last."

"We're sure to get somewhere soon, Maddy."

"Make it last, I said. Stop sucking it now."

"But——"

"By Chr——"

"—Kay, okay, I'm not arguing!"

Madison hesitates, haggard and grim. "You're not a praying man?"

"No. *I* say——"

"Right. Come on."

"—when you're dead, you're——"

"Come bloody *on!*"

Madison and Bennett go westward. Bennett, refreshed, has to say:—"I bet the others 'd like a nice lemon!"

Madison does not answer. They walk on, trailing fan-

tastic shadows. But they have not walked five hundred yards before Bennett falls forward, dead asleep. Madison turns towards him and then falls across him and sleeps also. There is a limit to what men can bear, and they have reached it.

Bennett and Madison do not hear the thunder in the west, where our little, inadequate air-force is attacking Sidi-bu-Zibula.

The Enemy forces are filling the sky with flak. There can be not the least doubt that General Eagles has gone raving mad and has bitten everybody about him. It is a matter of simple arithmetic: three into ten doesn't go.

The bulldog-headed General Dino Cura is in an exalted state of mind, as if he and God have exchanged knowing winks. The wind has blown and Eagles is scattered . . . the elements know on which side their bread is buttered! Meanwhile, von Osten is coming with nearly all the tanks in the world.

The end is at hand, thinks Cura. He permits himself to relax for a moment in reminiscence. . . . Shephard's Hotel is a very expensive place, but he will pay nothing . . .

Then somebody comes to tell him that the British attack is beaten off. Three British raiders are down. Cura nods. At this, a gentlemanly fellow with a white moustache offers a suggestion:—

“As it were a Sortie, from A₃, A₇, B₂, and——”

General Cura raises a hand. There is silence. He says:—

“To that?—Bah!”

“—Yet I feel, nevertheless, that if we attack now the Enemy must inevitably——”

“My dear sir,” says Cura, good-natured but firm, genial but formidable, “my dear sir, every step the Enemy takes now must cost him blood. Calm: there will be a time and a place!”

"But if he gets there before . . ."

"Before?"

"If von Osten is delayed . . ."

"Can you suggest one cogent reason why von Osten should be delayed? And if you could, can you suggest any means by which Eagles might cause us any serious inconvenience?"

"No, but——"

"But? *But?* What 'but'? There is only one 'but'. The more he advances, the weaker he grows. That is his 'but', not ours."

There is a silence. General Cura says:—"It would be a mistake to assume that we are absolute fools."

Officers of his staff nod their heads, and some of them smile. "All the same, this is no laughing-matter," snaps Cura.

One Staff-Officer whispers to another:—"I smell German sausage."

At an opportune moment the other replies:—"Keep it up your nose—tongues break necks!"

But Dino Cura is not far wrong. Eagles is in a bad way: his striking-force is so small that if he clenches his fist there will be nothing left; and, to make matters worse, supplies are seriously delayed.

Hence, Sergeant Doughty is heard saying: "Thirsty? Keep going and you'll get German beer." He throws in a sinister non sequitur:—"And not before."

Probyn-Tweed says to another Medical Officer:—"Not a sniff of chloroform more than absolutely necessary—not a milligramme of morphia, I warn you!"

A hundred miles behind him, something frightful is happening.

TEN

BACK on the obstructed road between the naked hills, the little officer of Pioneers who used to be a foreman navvy is grappling with the most terrifying problem that ever came out of a hole in the ground.

He has miscalculated, and is ashamed. In forty years of strenuous life he has been ashamed of only one other thing—his name, which is Clarence Algernon Gidget. But he has never blamed himself for his name, which he regards as a ridiculous act of God, like pigeon-toes or bow-legs. He does blame himself for the absurd situation in which he finds himself at this moment.

Lieutenant Gidget is not popular, but—like Regimental Sergeant-Major Heartborne—he is admired rather than disliked. Some men describe him as “cussed”; others call him “contrary”; his nickname is “The Gaffer”—Gidget is the conscientious foreman taken to his unreasonably logical conclusion; it is said that all he needs is a whip and a cigar, and then he would be a real slave-driver. He is disliked because he is hard, but liked because he is tough; detested because he is precise, but defended because he is just; respected because he sees everything but sneered at because he interprets what he sees according to unalterable standards. His absurdly small stature provokes two different curls of lip: an upward-curl, signifying contempt; and a downward-curl which says *Nevertheless, he's all there!*

Gidget can drive a gang of men, handling them as a mule-skinner handles the next-most-perverse animal on earth: he can squeeze out of you one last teaspoonful of sweat you never knew you had . . . and then wring forth three drops more for luck. But he is resented: he is so small—a man who behaves big ought to be big, whereas

you could put Gidget in a pint-pot and still pour in a gill of Burton-and-Bitter. He goes mad, as they say: he throws himself at a job so that bigger men cannot choose but follow him, if only to prove that they are stronger. A Viennese exile who served under him said: "Id is a sense of inferiority"; but he was not right. Gidget has no sense of inferiority—he keeps alive on self-esteem, and never felt inferior (except in rank) to anybody in the world.

He, the navvy-officer, is a born commander of men; but he speaks with the tongue of the men of "The Angel", Islington, and is knee-high to a grasshopper. So, while they obey him, men look askance at him . . . and he knows it.

Now, knowing that he has made a mistake, he is sick with shame.

What has happened?

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This:—

When the bomb exploded that liquidated the Engineers, it blew out a crater.

The blast of the exploding bomb caused a great truck to caracole like a circus-horse. Incidentally, it killed the driver; but this man does not matter, except to a few who love him. The truck, having almost turned a back-somersault, plunged down on its front wheels on the rim of the bomb-crater, and then executed something like a forward-roll, so that it lay belly-upwards, its back precariously supported on a shelf of hard sand.

At the same time there was a ten-second alternation of little landslides, like the cutting of a pack of cards.

Gidget, looking at the mess, was bewildered. What lay underneath the truck which appeared to be fixed for ever like an apple in a distended pair of jaws? It was necessary to see. He was certain that it would be easy for him to

slide down between the truck and the wall of the crater, have a look, and get out again: Gidget counted on the advantage of his almost-dwarfish size and weight. He let himself slip down, feet-first.

As he let himself go—before he had slid three feet—he knew that he had behaved foolishly. Sand pattered after him; the overturned truck grunted like a weight-lifter, and jolted down, nuzzling deep.

Gidget of the Pioneers found a heavily-loaded truck nudging him gently in the groin—almost provocatively, for the pressure was no harder than that of a coquette's hand.

And so he comes face-to-face with an appalling problem.

He knows that the truck has solved the problem of the bomb-crater: it has filled and bridged the hole so that it is not impassable.

But another hundred pounds of pressure will settle a weight of several tons into his little belly.

Yet a good ten hours must pass before the overturned truck can be hauled out.

And even then . . . what are the chances?

Gidget shouts, in his piercing, irritating voice:—"Wait a second up there!"

And he thinks fast and hard.

.

He feels that he is holding things up. Feeling thus, Gidget experiences something of the angry sadness of a cripple who, obsessed with the idea that he is in everybody's way, begins to eye the gas-oven. And although Gidget impresses people as a self-important little man, he takes a long view of things. He esteems himself as a link in a chain or a screw in a machine—as a small but necessary part of a vast, incomprehensible whole. He detests slackers, incompetent men, and other obstructionists: he

has said, a thousand times before, that no man has a right to clutter up a job of work through any disability whatsoever. Now, as he lies under the truck, he brings all his harsh commonsense to bear upon the situation.

He, Gidget, forty years old, seven stone in weight, married, father of an eighteen-year-old son who is six feet tall and a potential Officer in the R.A.F., he—Gidget of all men—is in the way. He is delaying thousands of tons of transport. In one day's action, the mechanised forces of General Eagles may need as much as twenty-five thousand gallons of petrol alone. Then there is water to be carried, and food, and countless tons of spare parts and of ammunition.

This hole in the road has made the way just a little too narrow for the trucks to pass. Something may be done to patch the hole; but not immediately. If this had happened half a mile eastward or half a mile westward, there would be no difficulty in driving round the crater. It was bad luck that it had to happen just here: now, the only thing to do is, dig away a slice of the bank on the right-hand side of the road. This can be done in half an hour or so, and when it is done it will serve as a makeshift—it will permit the transport to pass on towards the front line.

But if this is done, what happens to Gidget? The fallen truck is settling hair's-breadth by hair's-breadth; unless every available man works desperately to raise it a little, it must crush him to death.

But there are not enough men to spare for both jobs.

Gidget tells himself that he is a very useful man, and that an hour or so cannot make much difference to the winning of the war, in the long run.

At the same time, he reasons:—*On the other hand I stand a chance down here. Is it fair to put men on to getting me out first?*

And so, about five seconds after he has cried "Wait a second," Gidget steadies his voice and yells:—

"Are you listening up there? Listen. Don't waste no time fiddling down here. I'm kind of stuck for a second or two. Clear the way to the right, and chop off a few feet of that bank. And look sharp about it! Morgan! Take charge. Get cracking, now!"

An anxious Welsh voice sings: "Are you all right there, then?"

"You heard me! I'm all right. Get on the job, Morgan!"

He hears the old familiar music of heavy labour on the road. The truck is settling. He feels sand and rubble rolling down on to him, and knows that he will never get out of this hole alive. It gives him a certain macabre pleasure when he thinks how he has lived in holes in roads and must now die in a hole in a road. He yells, at the top of his piercing voice: "No idling! Hurry up there! You—Jonas! Put some more beef into it!"

Gidget almost smiles: it is always safe to assume that the man Jonas is putting into the job less than his utmost.

The men toil at the bank. Gidget hears other men working at the truck. Can it be that there is, after all, a chance?

Something slips away. The truck jolts down eighteen inches. The men above see this movement as something slow and gentle as a sigh.

They hear a soft but distinct crunch, as if somebody is eating barley-sugar. This is the last that will ever be heard from Gidget.

But the road is passable. With a great and triumphant roar the enormous lorries go forward.

Meanwhile General Eagles has announced that our forces have begun to carry out an engagement against the Italian armies in the desert at dawn.

Captain Probyn-Tweed hears a peculiar, deadly whispering:—

Tn!—Tn!—Tn!
Bla-bla-bla-bla—Tn!
Ah—Dna-dna-dna-dna!
Dnn-ah! Dnn-ah! Dnn-dnn-dnn!
Uhn . . . Uhn . . . Uhn . . .
Tn!—Tn!—Tn!—Tn!
Bla-bla-bla-bla-bla—Tn!

Heavy artillery. He tests the suppleness of his strong, scoured hands, and, looking to his instruments, prepares for splinter-wounds.

It is the long straight left of Eagles' attacking force. The thudding of it jerks Madison out of his little sleep. He shakes Bennett, who opens his eyes.

"Come on, Bennett."

"I was dreaming about telephones," says Bennett, following him. "Why the hell should I dream about telephones? What sort of time is it?"

Dawn has not yet broken. The sky is blue with the blueness of steel, tinted at its eastern edge with a translucent rosiness, an innocent and babyish pinkness. It is a sky of iron tempered in wine. As it lightens the desert becomes glorious; the sand becomes noble, and every mote of dust has its royal robe of pure brightness.

Bennett and Madison walk. As he goes, Madison looks to his rifle; wipes the bolt, perfunctorily cleans the barrel, and blows dust away from the sights. Bennett does likewise: he does, instinctively, whatever Madison chooses to do now. It is not that Madison has the air of a leader

or the manner of a man who expects to be obeyed: it is simply that Madison moves like a man who knows exactly what he is going to do and has a good reason for doing it. If, in his stern and deliberate way, Madison stood on his head, Bennett would try and do likewise.

The sun is coming up over the rim of the desert. "Hold it," whispers Madison, and falls flat; so does Bennett. They listen.

Not far away, somewhere beyond a sandy hump, somebody is talking. Nothing but a wordless mutter is audible. Madison lies still. The mutter comes nearer. Bennett whispers: "I swear to God somebody said *Darling*."

Madison wags an admonitory finger, but then the voice says, quite clearly, in a half-tone that rises and falls like a chant:—

"Come on darling . . . Ah, there's a love . . . There . . . there . . . there . . . Pretty, pretty! Come to daddy! Ahhhh-ah . . . Pretty, pretty."

Madison looks at Bennett; Bennett looks at Madison. They crawl forward and round. A few yards away from them, a man is lying on his belly and looking at something in the sand: an Englishman, brooding over a thing like a dirty grey spokeless wheel. He is feeling at this grey thing. He scrapes sand from under the lower edge of it, delicately lays down a small mirror such as girls carry in their handbags. "See pretty face," he says. "Show pretty face! Nice clean face . . ." He sings: "Nice little mine, nice little mine, Thou shalt not wash dishes nor yet feed the swine . . . But sit on a cushion and sew a fine seam . . . And feed upon strawberries sugar and cream . . ." Then his tone changes. He snaps: "Come on out, you bastard!"

Thereupon he cautiously lifts a large, flat, circular thing with a hole in the middle of it. It is a land-mine. Having laid it down on the sand beside him he draws a deep breath,

strokes it, and says: "Nice little mine! Go to sleep and grow up to be a nice *big* mine."

Madison says: "Hey!"

The Sapper pauses and says "George?"

"Hey!" says Madison.

"Hey? Straw!" says the Sapper, looking at him. "What do you think you're doing here?"

"Where are we, chum?"

The Sapper laughs. "Wherever you are, you keep still. Where are you? I'll tell you: you're right in the middle of a bloody minefield."

"Good God!" says Bennett.

Another Sapper, who appears to have sprung out of the ground says: "Angie, what's going on?"

The Sapper called Angie replies: "A couple of tourists, George; they just been picnicking round here. Why, you couple of mugs, you're in a minefield!"

Madison says: "We're Royal Archers. We got lost. Where do we go from here?"

The Sapper points behind him. "That way. You couple of babes in the wood, you got no right to be alive!"

"Back there where?" asks Bennett.

But Madison says: "I can follow your tracks back, son."

The Sapper replies: "You better."

"Much obliged," says Madison. He leads the way, while Bennett, staying close behind him, treads in his footprints. As they go they hear the Sapper Angie crooning again:—

"Little mine, pretty mine, blessings light upon you;
If I had half a crown a day
I'd spend it all upon you . . ."

He has found another live mine.

Between here and Sidi-bu-Zibula an area six miles

deep is mined, pocked with tank traps, strung with barbed wire, and dotted with outposts armed with anti-tank guns, flame-throwers, and machine-guns.

Those who say that Eagles is mad cannot, as it seems, be very far wrong.

Bennett and Madison go back. An hour later they encounter some of the well-scattered infantry of the Royal Archers.

They salute an Officer. Madison says: "Permission to fall in, please sir? We got lost."

So they fall in and march on. Sustained, now, by the presence of marching thousands, Bennett again becomes the most cheerful man in the column. Madison trudges ahead sombrely.

There is electricity in the air. This is going to be a terrific day.

ELEVEN

YET even now Mann's thoughts must crystallise in neat apophthegms and pretty maxims.

Looking about him and seeing a mass of moving men, he begins to think of their individual differences and their common similarities, and he wonders at the miraculous regimentation of an assembled Army. He sees a campaign as a kind of poetic essay, ragged with faulty couplets because rhyme is sacrificed to reason, yet patiently composed in spite of the frenzy and the agony which inspire it.

He sees loaded carriers bumping forward to advanced positions, and it seems to him that comrades in battle are comparable with people in love—they lose a little as separate personalities but, in the end, regain as parts of a united force, much more than they have lost.

He looks at Pryde and at young Ivy, thinks of Doughty and of Edgeworth, of Hazlitt and of the Lieutenant-Colonel, and of a hundred other soldiers whom he feels he has known all his life. And as the battle begins to break Mann thinks how it is not difficult for one man to know that he is one-tenth of a Section; and not easy for him to realise that he is no more than one-thirtieth of a Platoon . . . But a man must be a Soldier before he can see himself as one-hundredth of a Company; while he who, without loss of strength and pride, can know that he is one-ten-thousandth part of a Division—he is an adult man, a proper man; he can stand alone and still be a part of humanity.

Somewhere behind him artillery is thundering at the Italian positions. Fatigue begins to fall away, like fur from a hammered kettle: men feel again the metal of which God made them. Sergeant Edgeworth, chancing to pass within a yard of Doughty says:—

“Are bygones bygones?”

“No,” says Doughty. “They aren’t. What, have you gone yellow?”

“And have you gone mad?”

“Yellow, you’ve gone yellow,” says Doughty. “I knew it.”

“Oh, go to hell!”

“The same to you,” says Doughty. He can think of nothing else to say. “The same to you, you dirty yellow thief! I hope you get killed. May you get paralysed! May you die, you rotten bastard—and may *she* keep a ponce on your pension! Scram!”

“You madman, you! You’re——”

But then they move apart. The tanks are going forward.

Lackland is staring at the ground. His whole body is tingling: his mind is swaying upon the slack-wire of a loose-strung resolution. His stomach turns over, pulsating

with terror. He smells death, and is appalled. Why should he not, at an appropriate moment, taking advantage of the chaos to come, point his rifle at his foot and press the trigger? A .303 bullet, striking straight, does not make a big hole even at point-blank range; and he has been informed that you do not feel any pain for quite a considerable time after a bullet-wound . . . only a numbness, a sort of frozen sensation. But then, what comes after? He has had his foot trodden on before, and it hurt most damnably. How agonising, then, is the pain of smashed bone when sensation creeps back? Nevertheless, any pain must be better than death, surely? It is true that he might not die . . . yet it is also true that in a war the most valuable men, the Lacklands, get killed while fools without sensibility and brain—fools like Cream, and Madison, and Doughty, and Cherry—survive to dance on their graves. He says: "Oh God, God, God!" How cruel is the Destiny that forces such awful decisions upon a man! Ah-ah. Best to be careful; there may after all be an all-knowing God. *God tell me what to do*, he prays. He cannot think any more.

The surly voice of Doughty is heard saying: "You men better not let me down! I'll scoff the swine that lets me down! So remember!" Several others growl: "Shut up!"

Cherry says to him: "Is your arm all right?"

"Arm? Oh, arm! Forget it."

Ivy says to Pryde: "Of course, there's ever so many more of us than one can see?"

Pryde does not answer. He is no longer tired, now, and the ancient and nameless terrors are crawling back one by one . . . he feels their little cold legs mounting his buttocks and spine.

"Eh?" says Ivy.

"Yes," says Pryde, and then the two men part. Ivy stiffens himself. He looks so young that a burly Platoon-

Sergeant is reminded of his thirteen-year-old son, and is choked with pity for a moment; until pity gives place to half-contemptuous wonder. What kind of nonsense is this? Who is this beardless boy with a pip on his shoulder and a revolver at his thigh?

"All right, Sergeant Champion?" asks Ivy, in a firm clear voice.

Sergeant Champion forgets himself and replies: "All right, son," in a paternal voice. Ivy blushes under the dirt on his face, and pretends not to have heard. Overhead shells are beginning their cold and deliberate screaming. They are bursting somewhere in the rear. The dust is up again. At a hundred yards men become ghosts.

Hazlitt, to whom a little coarse humour is irresistible as wine to a drunkard, is keeping up the spirits of such men as happen to be within earshot by means of an improper speech. It is lucky for Hazlitt that the C.O. cannot hear him: that terrible old soldier has had occasion to reprove him once before for a manner of speaking unbecoming to an Officer and a gentleman. But the Lieutenant-Colonel is very busy several hundreds yards away, and Hazlitt is saying:—

"Well, you idle bunch of tripy tykes! Are you ready, eh? Are you ready for it, sweetie-pies? Any moment now, you matinee idols! This is what we came here for, my cock-alorums. In just one second now you'll know whether you're soldiers or not, my lovelies! This'll put hair on your chests, you glamour-girls! This'll rub some of the cold-cream and powder off your little noses, you scented lot of tarts! Watch out for yourselves—we're going to inspect the insides of your trousers later on, so hold in your guts! Well, cheer up! If you go to hell it can't be much worse than being in the Army! What? . . ."

Only Hazlitt can get away with such talk: his reckless-

ness and good humour are so unmistakably genuine that whatever he says has something of the quality of a fiercely joyous oration; his gaiety is infectious, his fearlessness makes itself felt. He has a knack of lifting up men's hearts.

He says: "We're going for the Wadi. We're going to have to treat 'em rough. I'm afraid all this is going to end in bloodshed—it might even lead to war. If that man over there doesn't stop picking his nose I'll put him in the report."

Pryde fixes his left-hand eye-teeth in his lip and tears himself out of a timeless nightmare. He draws a deep breath, coughs out a throatful of dust and tries to moisten dry lips. Inexplicably, he feels better: this is because it has been decided, in a secret session behind sealed doors at the back of his soul, that anything in the world is better than shame, and that he may not by any means continue to live even with a secret, undiscovered shame; he has declared war to the death against Fear. He says, very distinctly:—

"Now I expect we are going to do something. We are going to do what we set out to do."

Mr. Mann—and this is odd—cannot think of anything to say, although, for the first time in years, he really feels an impulse to say something short and sharp and powerful. So he says nothing. But while his eyes glance left and right and back again to his watch, he thinks:—*One can see nothing but a little foggy area in front of one. For all any of us knows the rest of the Army may have retreated. But here we are, fully prepared to die blindly-faithful to an incomprehensible order. How strange . . . !* The seconds jerk away. Mann takes a sidelong look through the key-hole of his soul, and arrives at the conclusion that he is not afraid to die . . . only reluctant to kill. But since there is

killing to be done he hopes that he may prove equal to the task. He feels slightly sick: it is not fear, but doubt.

There are five seconds to go, and the desert in front is rattling and resounding like a corrugated-iron hut in a hail-storm.

Four seconds . . .

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General Cura, hitching up his dangerous-looking lower jaw, speaks at this moment to his Staff. Cura makes men feel safe—no intruder could set foot over a threshold that Cura chooses to guard: he is a bulldog with strategic intuition, fierce and subtle, calm and ugly, nobody's fool.

He is rounding off an analytical statement. He has said:—

“It is essential to bear in mind the enemy psychology. It was not practically possible for Eagles to get here by now. Remember that I say ‘Not *practically* possible’. Possible, yes, to reach Sidi-bu-Zibula on all-fours, exhausted. Not possible to come as a force fit to fight. But consider: *if* this were within the bounds of probability—then what? Eagles is outweighed. If he were where we are, then he might hold a superior force for twelve, eighteen, say twenty hours—say twenty-four hours. But as a defending force, we must be hunting him like a dog hunts a rabbit within ten, twelve—say twenty hours from now. He is throwing a weak, exhausted army against a strong position. Even if a miracle occurred, he could not withstand our allied reinforcements. Von Osten is almost with us . . .

“Delayed? Naturally delayed! By the same wind, the same natural phenomenon that blew against the Enemy. Von Osten has had farther to come. Again, he is a hard man, not at all stupid: he will arrive fighting-fit—bear that

in mind! He is not taking part in a marathon-dance—he is fighting a hard fight, to win. I know von Osten. Delayed a little? I grant you that. Does this matter? We can beat back a heavier weight and a fresher enemy than any Eagles can throw against us . . . even assuming that it would be possible for him to force M₄, M₅, M₇, and N₃—to enumerate only four—and cross the Wadi . . .”

And now Cura says:—

“It is necessary not to ignore the spirit of a resolute opponent, however. I like a fighter, by God! All the same, it is none the less pathetic. What folly! With us, in agreement, they might have gone far, eh? The English . . . eh?”

There is a noise like the grinding of colossal teeth.

“*Ecco*,” says General Dino Cura.

The tanks are bouncing out to join battle.

.

Three seconds . . .

General Eagles sits tense. He does not feel well. Somewhere in his bowels, between his belt-line and his navel, he feels the stirring of an old humiliating pain. There is a strange feeling at the back of his mouth. He knows what this means; or he thinks he does. Eagles, a man of the tropics, has suffered with a disease called Sprue; he recognises something despicably familiar, something symptomatic. Horror takes hold of him; this must not happen now. Nevertheless he knows the feeling . . . the queer, vitiating ache and the slow, iron grip of the cramp. He feels a prickly coldness on his forehead, and instinctively strokes it with his hand and looks at his finger-tips: they are damp. He is cold . . . no, he is hot. With an effort that almost wrenches his soul out of his body he shakes his eyes into focus, muffles the drum that is beating in his skull

between his ears, and forces himself into the work before him as one forces a gimlet—a blunt gimlet—into hard wood.

He feels the pulse in his left wrist thudding against his watch-strap.

He says: "At all costs we have got to get over the Wadi."

"Yes," says somebody else, "but it'll be costly."

"Yes," says General Eagles.

His shoulders ache abominably and he knows that he has a temperature.

Two seconds . . .

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The Enemy artillerymen have been working steadily. They have been scratching around where they know their adversaries lie, with the ferocious patience of men trying to catch fleas.

The Italian artillery has a function: to make the approach to the Wadi not worth while. Having found its range it is raking the desert beyond.

But our artillery is replying; not with noticeable effect. The Lieutenant-Colonel with the malacca moustache pushes out his upper lip and utters an exclamation expressive of scornful incredulity. He says: "When I was five years old I could lay a gun better than that! God!"

At this moment something whistles *Phweeee-ooo!*

About fifty yards from where the Lieutenant-Colonel is standing a shell bursts. The Lieutenant-Colonel claps his hand to his stomach as if he has suddenly remembered something, and sits down with his legs crossed in front of him. Bending forward slowly and inevitably like a broken plant, he says with petulant astonishment: "How bloody stupid! How *blasted* stupid!" Then he takes a red, wet hand away from his stomach and tries to smooth down his

moustache. But he lives long enough to smooth only the right-hand half. Then he dies.

One second . . .

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Sergeant Edgeworth has been thinking of Sergeant Doughty, with sorrow and anger. He feels guilty of a horrible treachery; he has taken away from a good man the love of the only woman in all the world. Now comes the battle, and God knows what at the end of it; but Edgeworth will not be content until he has had this matter out—beaten it out to a logical, a reasonable end. It is not his fault; it is nobody's fault. He thinks:—*If I was Doughty I wouldn't lower myself, I wouldn't make myself so cheap; I'd say I didn't care tuppence. The fool! Everybody will talk . . .*

Bennett says to Madison: "Pity we mislaid Doughty. I meant to tell you it was my fault."

Madison replies "What difference does it make?"

The second-hand jerks between the last two marks on the watch-dial.

"Come on!" yells Hazlitt; and leaps forward.

Men fly forward after him like a mouthful of peas shot out of a tube.

We attack the Wadi.

TWELVE

How much of a battle can a soldier witness? If a man is swimming for his life, how much of the ocean does he see? Half a dozen perilous yards in front of him, a few menacing feet to the right and the left of him, perhaps; while as for what lies behind him, he knows nothing and has no time

to guess. He is straining every muscle and nerve in order to keep alive. If anger, or fear, or the excitement of combat have not crowded out all other emotions, he may occasionally feel a certain astonishment at not being dead. Mr. Mann has always believed that the peculiar dull silence of old, scarred warriors is not the silence of sick horror, but the silence of vague emptiness—the half-shamefaced silence of men who cannot think of anything to say. A soldier can only speak of what he alone has done; and this may be told in a few seconds, because there is not very much for one man to do. When the moment comes, the fierce moment of bloody contact, every man is alone in his own red mist with his own desperate enemy. The beautifully-co-ordinated army breaks up, for a little while, into the atoms of which it is composed—into tiny, lonely life-histories.

We attack the Wadi.

Over our heads the batteries are throwing thunder-bolts. Higher still, the fighting forces of the air are circling and turning, feinting and striking. Away to the south and south-west millions of tons of steel rush together, roaring like all the devils in hell and thundering like the end of the world, as the tanks join battle. Still farther away the mechanised forces of Arminius von Osten are eating up the desert. Everything that can smash, burn, splinter and annihilate men and machines is converging, now: the desert is sucking in the destructive forces of the Universe for a tom-tom dance of death and a carnival of blood and fire among the ruins.

Now, not even Mann stops to think that this Wadi, this dried-up path of an evaporated river, is nothing but an almost invisible mark on a map enlarged to include the pimples and the blackheads between the shoulder-blades of the desert . . . that this attack is only one jabbing rally in a mighty battle; that the battle itself is nothing but one

round in a fight to a finish; that the entire campaign is but an incident in the African War; that the African War in all its bloody magnitude is merely a skirmish in one dusty corner of a battlefield as vast as the earth.

He thinks of nothing but the space that separates him from the Enemy in the turbulent dust ahead.

On the escarpment on the other side of the Wadi the Italians are waiting. A machine-gunner, watching the dust, sees the slow materialisation of men. He opens fire, and sees a number of them fall.

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He has been firing at Sergeant Doughty's platoon. Townskip is down, shot through the chest and frothily coughing in the dust.

"Where they get you?" asks Doughty.

Townskip points; he cannot speak. Doughty takes away his ammunition. Townskip tries to breathe, utters a bubbling cry, shudders from head to foot and lies still. Nobody looks at him. From different points along the Italian line machine-gunners are pouring out streams of bullets. Corporal Cherry, hearing a rifle crack nearby bellows: "Save it! Don't fire unless you can see what you're firing at!"

It is Lackland who has fired. He had made up his mind; extended his left hand, pulled back his rifle with his right, pressed trembling fingers over the muzzle and pulled the trigger. What, after all, does a finger matter? And who is to know what he has done? But in the last instant, even as his trigger-finger contracted, his nerve failed him, and he snatched his left hand away as the firing-pin struck. So now he lies, sick and faint, unhurt except for a bruise on his leg where the recoiling rifle has struck him. Cherry says: "You clumsy bastard! Are you trying to kill some-

body? You ain't fit to be trusted with a rifle, you woman!"

Then the slow and heavy mind of Corporal Cherry begins to perceive Lackland's intentions. "Was you trying to give yourself a self-inflected wound?" he asks.

"No," says Lackland. "It was an accident."

Ben Cream is squinting along his rifle-barrel, and whistling under his breath. What God wills God wills, he has decided; if any dago shows himself, Cream is going to let him have it, and may he be forgiven! But he cannot see anybody yet, although the air is singing and crackling, hissing and whistling, whining and squealing about a deadly flight of rifle and machine-gun bullets. "The Wops are bobbing," says Cherry, "they can't see a thing: it's a dead waste of ammo."

Doughty replies: "What's the matter? What are *you* worried about? Nobody's going to stop it out of your pay."

They crawl forward. Mortars are banging—nobody can see where. In some unknown shadow-land on the left somebody is getting the range of a snug little machine-gun position. He has found it. The mortar gives out its muffled, petulant little explosion twice more. For the first time in their lives men in the attacking companies hear a death-scream as an enemy machine-gunner runs blindly into the open and then falls on his face. A Bren-gunner sucking in a small, downy moustache, sees men moving on the Italian side and fires a couple of short bursts at them: he will never know whether he has hit them or missed them. In point of fact he has killed one man and wounded two; thus shedding human blood for the first time in his life. At home, he works as a sandwich-cutter in a ham-and-beef shop.

Falkland Bead, the school-teacher, feels something like a friendly push, and is astonished to see a redness on his sleeve.

Men are falling now. Pryde grits his teeth and hopes to God that they may charge soon and get it over. Between his ribs his heart is drumming like the fingers of an anxious and impatient man. Is there to be no end of this agony of waiting?

From a great distance, half-lost in the uproar, there comes a sound of shouting. And then the word comes.

Pryde rises into a crouching position and throws his hand forward in a great sweeping gesture.

The Royal Archers throw themselves down into the Wadi and charge, yelling, into the open.

Before he has taken three strides forward, little Mr. Ivy spins round in a fantastic pirouette and falls backward, shot in the centre of his smooth young forehead; he lies with his arms outstretched in an attitude of luxurious relaxation like a man taking a well-earned rest after a hard day of healthy sport. Men leap over him. A bull-necked brewer's drayman, struck by three bullets, stops as if he has run into an invisible door, leaps miraculously into the air and falls face down; his right hand, hairy as a bear's paw, opens and closes in a last convulsive grip on Ivy's left wrist, and so he dies.

We are half-way across. Doughty is nearly there. The long-legged Hazlitt has got his platoon to within fifty yards of the Italian line. The plump soldier whom he called Fatbun, he who cherishes the memory of the cigarette Hazlitt borrowed from him, slides back wounded in the act of throwing a hand-grenade. He falls near where Rigby Thack, the ex-convict, is lying with a shattered shoulder together with Rafter, the homesick Bedfordshire man. The grenade rolls away; the plump man hears the snap of the pin on the detonator of the four-second fuse, and sees the little black bomb lying in the sand next to Rafter who, clutching his belly with both hands, is bending forward

and groaning. And then he sees Thack twisting his battered back-alley-fighters face into an expression of hideous disdain and throwing himself forward so that he falls on the grenade chest-first. He shuts his eyes, hears a small muffled explosion, feels a spatter of sand on a breath of hot air and a splash of something warm and sticky . . . and then the sun goes out like a candle in a draught, and the noise fades away and his last conscious thought is:—*This is the same as going to sleep . . .*

Doughty is up and over. Cherry hears the shattering noise of his Tommy-gun in a confined space, and then he is with him. Ben Cream comes over, a figure of terror, red-eyed and bare-headed: three thickset Italian riflemen fall back before him. One of them fires at him, misses, and is a dead man: the point of Cream's bayonet takes him under the chin, emerges pink like a dog's tongue. The thunder of the artillery behind them grows louder and louder as the guns pound down the defences of Sidi-bu-Zibula. Away on the left the tanks have broken through, and, whooping like cannibals, a mad-doggery of Highlanders is racing in to come to handgrips with Italy. On the right an Italian flame-thrower which has been coughing out long ragged sheets of liquid fire stops with a fizzle and a splutter while helmeted men run out with upraised hands through the stinking smoke to surrender. A hard-faced Major from North Italy, finding himself deserted, says to a Captain: "You may go to the devil your own way: I will go in my way. I was at Caporetto. Once is enough, twice is too much; this is a scandal, a disgrace, a cheap comedy. Excuse me . . ."

He thumbs back the hammer of his Beretta pistol and shoots himself neatly through the heart. The Captain is sick; but he wipes his lips with a silk handkerchief, straightens his tunic and walks out to surrender with the gracefully tragic air of a Roman in a play.

The British forces are closing in. The full weight of the assault falls on Sidi-bu-Zibula from the rear.

General Valentino says to General Cura: "Have the kindness to tell me, my friend; where are our Germans now?"

Cura looks at him with haggard eyes, moistens his lips, shrugs his shoulders, raises his arms and lets them fall again, and says: "Body and Blood of Jesus Christ! Something must have happened."

Valentino replies: "Something has happened."

Sidi-bu-Zibula is falling. It is going down, helpless and agonised, but angry, like a large and confident wrestler caught in a hammerlock by a bold little opponent whom he feels he ought to have beaten with one hand tied.

One Staff Colonel says to another: "The devil! there is a fatality, Domenico! Whatever happens, our flag turns white. We are the Punchinellos of the world, and our military history is a book of jokes."

Sergeant Doughty, breathless and exhausted, sees a white cloth fluttering in the distance. As he looks a dozen more white specks appear.

A faint voice from the dust at his feet says: "Are we winning, Sergeant?" It is Ben Cream, whose knee-cap has been smashed by a ricochet.

"We've won," says Doughty. "Are you all right, son?"

"My knee pains me a bit, Sergeant."

"They'll fix you up in no time. Knees are nothing, son."

Doughty is full of heaviness and depression. The thrill of the fight is giving place to gloom. Like drink, it leaves an acidity and a stale aftertaste. *My poor old platoon!* he says to himself. Then Cherry comes up, limping on tired feet.

"My poor old platoon took a coating," says Doughty. "Where is everybody."

"We carried the can," growls Cherry.

"The big attack was from over there, I should say," says Doughty. "We had to sort of occupy their attention, the way I see it. Mann's down."

"Dead?"

"Don't know: saw him go over—bayonet," says Doughty, "belly, I think. Seen Hazlitt?"

"No. You?"

"No. Oh . . . roll on Duration! I'm tired out."

"Me too," says Cherry. "Me too."

"Well . . . what did you think of it?"

"Think of what?"

"This here show."

Cherry shrugs his thick shoulders. "I dunno. You?"

"I dunno either. Not like you think it's going to be, eh?" says Doughty.

"I dunno. What like did you think it was going to be?"

"I dunno."

"No more do I," grunts Cherry.

Doughty remembers something. "Where's Edgeworth?"

"Couldn't say. I wonder how many we lost?"

"I wonder where Edgeworth is," says Doughty. He stands erect with an effort, and walks on.

Twenty yards away he finds Sergeant Edgeworth lying in a hollow. Doughty stops with a thumping heart, and stoops to look closely at the stony-white face of the man on the ground. "You dead?" he asks.

Edgeworth opens his eyes and answers: "Just about."

"Want some water or something?"

"Don't want anything."

"Well . . ." says Doughty.

"You don't like me," says Edgeworth.

"Well . . . I'm entitled not to like you."

"God's honour, Doughty, I never hurt your feelings on purpose."

"Let's see where they got you."

"Don't waste your time. My dying oath, I never did you down on purpose, Doughty—my life I didn't!"

"No?"

"No. My honour I didn't! How we doing?"

"All right."

"Doughty . . ."

"What?"

"Bygones bygones?"

Doughty is silent: his pride sticks in his throat. Edgeworth says again:—"Bygones? Shake on it?"

Doughty hesitates, licks his lips, and says "Well . . ." He wipes his right hand on his thigh. "All right then, shake and forget it," he says. But Edgeworth has already died.

The smile that has begun to crack the dust on Doughty's face freezes and then disappears. Anger and misery come back to his eyes and mouth. He picks up Edgeworth's dead right hand and shakes it, gripping it with all his strength; then he lets it go, and it falls limply into the dust.

"What's the use?" says Doughty. He turns on his heel and walks away.

He sees Lackland, swaggering now, driving twenty cheerful Italians at the point of a fixed bayonet. "I took these prisoners," says Lackland.

"Who couldn't?" says Doughty.

"I captured them, Sergeant!"

"You don't have to capture *them*—they stick to you like flypaper."

"What shall I do with them?"

Doughty tells Lackland what he can do with them. As he turns away a little Italian soldier says:—"Mistro! Youra iremember me? Cenci's Café—ina Notampaton? Youra

iremember Tullio? I know ayou!" The little man smiles sweetly, and takes off an aluminium ring which he offers to Doughty, saying: "Chrissimas-box—for ayou." He is radiant with happiness.

"Get to hell," says Doughty. He feels sick and sad.

This is the twilight hour of the stretcher-bearers, the blind man's holiday that falls between the red dusk of the bayonets and the white night of the little knives.

THIRTEEN

AT this hour nobody can think of anything or desire anything but sleep. A battle is not bad and a victory is very good; but men must rest before they can rejoice—they will talk about it tomorrow, after they have peeled some of the black velvet off their eyes. At present nothing matters but unbroken sleep. An untied bootlace is better than glory. If anybody prays now for Peace, what he really means is: *Please God, take off my socks.*

Yet weary as he is, Mr. Pryde cannot rest. He is drugged with delight as with cocaine—he has sniffed ecstasy and floated up beyond himself. Pryde feels that he is born again, cleansed of fear. Looking at his dirty face in a steel shaving-mirror of the kind that is supposed to serve as armour against shrapnel-wounds, Pryde knows the joy of an impoverished collector who has crept into a lumber-room to die and discovered an Old Master among the rubbish. At such moments as this a man forgives all his enemies—even himself. "Fear?" says Pryde aloud, and laughs. He is happy; he wants to be kind and helpful to all the world. Putting the mirror back in his pocket he looks about him for somebody, anybody, to whom he may say a cheerful and friendly word. It happens that the first man he sees is Roast.

"What's your name?"

"Roast, sir."

"Roast. Well, Roast? Are you all right?"

"Yes thank you, sir. You all right, sir?"

"Oh, fine, fine! Have a cigarette? Here—take the packet. Hadn't you better get that hand tied up?"

"Hand?" Roast looks at his hands; the skin over all the knuckles is split. "That's nothing, sir. I took a tumble."

"Well, look after yourself."

"Yes sir. Sir . . ."

"Yes, Roast?"

"Will we get letters soon?"

"I daresay we shall. Why?"

"I'm worried about Mrs. Roast, sir—we was expecting a kid."

"Good man! Oh . . . I'm quite sure there'll be no delay. And I'm quite sure that everything is going to be all right."

"Thank you, sir."

As Pryde walks away, Roast looks at him sourly and says in an inaudible whisper: "And what the hell do *you* know about it?" He clenches his fists, not in anger but in a spasm of awful pity . . . Women; what suffering on earth is like the suffering of a Woman?

At this moment his wife, having given birth to an eight-pound son almost as easily as she kicks off her slippers, is fast asleep and snoring a little, and there is a blissful smile on her lips. But if Roast could see her now he would clench his hands tighter still and say: "Dead whacked; worn out; it's hell to be a woman!"

Pryde speaks to Doughty: "Have you seen Mr. Mann?"

"Corporal Cherry says Mr. Mann got hurt, sir."

"Good God!"

"They'll have taken him back now, I should think."

.

Mann has been stabbed in the abdomen, and is in atrocious pain. He has heard that men with belly-wounds dig their own graves before they die, because they writhe so hard: he understands now that this may be true. He clenches his teeth and shuts his eyes, swimming on waves of nausea, and feels that every vibration of the air must tear him asunder. Is he dying? He is shivering with cold. Swallowing a groan he tries to lie still. Stillness, stillness—in stillness lies the secret of survival and of healing. What is the name of the good Surgeon who cures horrible wounds by keeping men still? Trueta? Is it Trueta who puts men into plaster and immobilises them while Nature crochets, darns, splices and replenishes burned and blasted tissues? *Still, still!* Let God's steady hand work unhampered!

Some little movement somewhere feels like a thrust with a barbed trident. He rolls his eyes back, and seems to see the inside of his skull as a dome full of mist behind which little weak lights glimmer in opalescent haloes like lamps in a deserted station in an autumnal evening . . . and then comes a huge and fearsome darkness that heaves like the Midnight Sea upon which Fate, in the fairy-story, wearily rows his heavy boat forever . . .

Then he feels, rather than sees, a brightness, opens his eyes and groans. Probyn-Tweed, ash-grey with fatigue, is looking down at him.

Mann whispers: "Is it bad?"

"There are worse," says Probyn-Tweed.

"Will I live?"

"You'll live."

The world is swimming away. Mann, light-headed, asks: "Do you love mankind?"

"No," says Probyn-Tweed, "I do my job."

"Thanks." Mann sleeps.

Ten minutes later Probyn-Tweed says: "Let's have the next one."

"There's quite a pretty leg here, sir."

Ben Cream is brought in.

A little pellet of sheathed lead, spinning with a ton or so of power behind it and rebounding from a stone in the form of a burglar's jemmy can do gruesome work before it comes to rest.

"Mm-hum!" says Probyn-Tweed . . .

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Ben Cream is soaring beyond the world and the flesh. The anæsthetic holds his body entranced while his soul flutters away, out of space and time. He knows that once again he is to be granted a glimpse of the glorious light of God's countenance. He rushes up and away through span-gled infinities, where the morning stars sing together and all the sons of God shout for joy. He is flying so that the lightnings crawl below him like shiny snail-tracks. It is coming! It is coming! The Light of the World is rising up over the rim of Eternity, and he goes up to meet it. In one moment the Light will burst and sprinkle him, and the Voice will say the Words of Power—and if he can remember them he will know everything, and his will be the Peace of God.

The Light swells; it bursts and blinds him, and the Voice speaks again. Ben Cream gropes with all his soul, catches the Words and holds them . . . and then he comes back to consciousness with a little sobbing laugh.

The Words are: *Baby Bunting*.

He remembers now that his mother used to call him Baby Bunting, ever so many years ago.

Ben Cream turns his face away from the sight of men and weeps bitterly for a lost ecstasy. He sees his Faith like

a fallen bird trailing broken wings in the dust; and so he cries himself to sleep.

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Among the walking casualties there is a tall, pale man dressed in the ragged remains of an Officer's uniform. He is unwounded except for a long S-shaped gash on the left-hand side of his face. He stands erect, but his head is bent so that his chin touches his chest. There is an odd expression on his face. A casual observer would say that he was angry: his forehead and eyebrows are drawn down so that there is an indentation like a letter W over the bridge of his nose, and his lips are pressed away into a line. But, if one looks closely at him, it is easy to see that he is not angry—only bewildered.

Somebody says to him: "Shook you up a bit, sir?"

The tall man shakes his head impatiently. "Just a minute," he says. "Hold on just a minute. Now . . . what's that again?"

"It shook you up a bit, didn't it, sir?"

"What do you mean, shook me up a bit?"

"No offence?"

"No, damn it all, of course there isn't. What do you mean? Why should there be any offence? I asked you a civil question. What was it you said?"

"I said no offence, sir."

"Was that what you said? I thought . . ."

People exchange glances.

A Company Sergeant-Major who is holding something wet and red over the place where the top of his left ear used to be says: "Not badly hurt I hope, sir?"

"No . . . I don't think so. Why, what do you mean, badly hurt? And who are you anyway?"

The Sergeant-Major raises his eyebrows, winces, and

says: "Cox, sir. Cox, Arthur George."

"How do you do? I don't think we've met before. . . ?"

Cox grins uneasily. His quick little eyes glance up and down. "Sorry, sir," he says.

"Sorry? Sorry? Who's sorry? What for? What the devil's the matter with you? . . . And who are you anyway?"

"Cox, sir, Sergeant-Major of B Company."

"B Company? Company? Did I work for a Company? Were you a director? I'm sorry," says the tall man in a strained and unnatural voice, "I really am very sorry, but I seem to have gone . . . a little . . ."

Sergeant-Major Cox murmurs: "You know who you are, don't you, sir?"

"Of course I do," says the tall man.

"Do you, sir?" asks Cox, sorrowfully.

"How the devil should I know?" asks the tall man. "Do I *what*?"

"Do you know who you are?"

The tall man shakes his head.

Cox says: "You're Lieutenant the Lord Hazlitt, sir,"

"I am?"

"Yes sir."

"I am . . . who is it?"

"Lord Hazlitt, sir."

"I've never heard of him."

"Then who are you, sir, if you're not?"

"I don't know. I don't know what you're talking about . . ."

An Orderly asks a Staff-Sergeant: "Staff—will he get his memory back?"

"He might, or he might not."

"He's the one that just come into about ten million pounds, isn't he?"

"Why?"

"Wouldn't it be horrible to forget a thing like that?"

The Staff-Sergeant says: "My God!"

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At Headquarters, General Eagles is saying: "It seems that we have something like seventy-thousand prisoners, including . . . yes, about eight Generals and about three-thousand Officers; at least a hundred and fifty tanks; six or seven hundred guns at the very least, and no less than a thousand machine-guns. What will our casualties be, Wiggs?"

A Lieutenant-General with a broken nose says: "At a rough estimate, something in the region of a couple of thousand—which is negligible, all things considered."

"All things considered, yes," says General Eagles. "But . . ."

He stops; he had been about to say: *How can you consider* all things? Instead, Eagles says "von Osten is coming . . ." His brain feels like a lump of lead in a paper bag, and as he looks down at his skinny left wrist he sees the pulse jumping like a rabbit in a sack.

"You need sleep," says Wiggs.

"We all need sleep," says General Eagles, and he draws a deep breath in an endeavour to lift the dead weight that seems to be pressing on his stomach. "This game has hardly begun," he says, exhaling.

Wiggs feels a strong urge to slap Eagles on the back. But he does not; he only says: "Ha," and thinks that little Tomtit deserves a peerage . . . a peerage and a good night's sleep.

Not far away, Private Bennett lies in deep, dark slumber. He has been made a Corporal on the field. Tomorrow, when he wakes up, he will think of Madison, who

is missing, and hope that he is still alive and that they may meet again soon. But tomorrow is a thousand years away. Until then Bennett will think of nothing, good or evil . . . and when he does begin to think, it may be that the things he remembers will seem shadowy and remote like events in a dream.

Happy are they that sleep deep: they are at peace. Also blessed are they that watch by night: God gives them a sunrise.

An enormous quiet has fallen upon the desert. Under the stars men labour at the broken shells of ruined tanks, while grain by grain the sand rolls down quietly obliterating their tracks, and a few last white ribbons of smoke creep out of the battered iron giants in the dust.

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Now men on guard, looking towards the West, see a vague flickering of pallid light. Then they hear trip-hammer thud of distant guns. Von Osten is coming: the Enemy is crashing through. He has the advantage in weight, wings, and armour. (So had Apollyon, whom only the last inspired thrust could rout.)

Today is falling behind into the blank file of yesterday's history. The battery-flashes are winking brighter and twitching faster on the horizon.

At Headquarters a motor-cycle squeals and stops while a despatch-rider dismounts. It stands balanced, quivering.

Tomorrow closes in.

THE END

*London, Pirbright,
Woking:
July-August 1943.*

